

Space, Place, and Identity in the Prose of Dionne Brand

Robyn Silver

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ABSTRACT

Space, Place, and Identity in the Prose of Dionne Brand

Robyn Silver, M.A.
Concordia University, 2007

Dionne Brand's prose explores the Black subjects' relation to place and space across both historical and spatial trajectories. Focusing on Brand's prose, the thesis draws on recent scholarship in the areas of literature and social geography to pursue questions of identity and identification and to examine the intersection of gendered and racialized subjectivities with place and space through the foci of language and history. Examinations of *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), *No Burden to Carry* (1991), *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), and selected stories from *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988) investigate the implications of place and space in the retrieval and retelling of personal and collective histories. These texts explore how the Canadian present enables the creation of a history for Black subjects in Canada, one that is inflected by the other places and spaces of the Caribbean and Africa. As identities are developed, learned, and articulated through the language of a place, I consider *In Another Place, Not Here* (1997) and *Bread Out of Stone* (1994) to explore possibilities of exclusion and silencing, belonging and empowerment, and resistance, as expressed in and through language. Lastly, *What We All Long For* (2005) highlights a shift in Brand's representation of identities, places, and spaces, and my analysis considers the continuities and new approaches to Brand's depiction of the relation of identity to place and space.

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Intersections: Establishing A Theoretical Framework

Dionne Brand's multi-generic corpus has allowed the Trinidadian-Canadian author to engage in a sustained exploration of the relation of subject to place. She has pursued this exploration in the genres of poetry, prose, and film. Given the scope of her oeuvre, for the purpose of this thesis I will focus my analysis on her prose works in a wide range of modes: short story, novel, social history, essay, and auto/biographical text. Brand's writing focuses primarily on Black¹, female subjects, locating them within a spatial trajectory shuttling between Africa, the Caribbean, and Canada, and in an historical trajectory from pre-slavery to the present. The critical concern of the present thesis is with the gendered and racialized subject's relation to place and space. Through the representations of the characters' psychological and physical displacement, Brand explores the centrality of place and space to subject formation. The thesis will draw on the critical frameworks of literary studies and social geography in order to provide a fuller account of the relation of subject to place in Brand's prose.

An examination of some of the recent developments in the emergent fields of Black Canadian cultural and literary studies and of the study of space and place in social geography will provide a theoretical framework for my discussion of the gendered and racialized subject's relation to space and place in Dionne Brand's oral history project, essays, short stories, and novels.

¹ I will be capitalizing the word 'Black' throughout the thesis, unless quoted with a lower case 'b', to adhere to the suggestion by Dionne Brand and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta in *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots* that capitalization denotes a broader meaning: "the word 'Black' has been given an initial capital to stress a common heritage, a cultural and personal identity" (iii).

I. Theories of Canadian Blackness: Pan African, Diasporic, and Exilic Perspectives

In 2002, Black Canadian author, poet and critic George Elliot Clarke published an anthology of his critical writings and essays focusing on the project of “Mapping African-Canadian Literature,” as the subtitle of *Odysseys Home* suggests. The essays collected in this volume are an attempt, Clarke writes, “to contest the erasure and silencing of black culture and history in Canada” (Clarke 6). Seeking to address the critical neglect and misrepresentation of Black Canadian literature, Clarke’s project aims to reconfigure the nature of contemporary literary analysis of Black Canadian writing. One of his primary complaints is that “the study of African-Canadian literature, culture and history too often reflects a master discourse of black inadequacy, inferiority, [and] illegality” (8). Clarke calls for an engagement with Black Canadian texts that will pay close attention to their literary qualities, but he also aims, in this volume, to develop a theoretical framework for the study of Canadian blackness. Black Canadian identity, Clarke contends, is doubly contested, from within the Canadian context and from without. From without, it is contested by a powerful African-American discourse: in the United States, “[t]o be ‘Black’ and Canadian ... [is] to suffer the erasure of Canadian as a legitimate expression of black identity” (5). In the United States, Black Canadians are denied acknowledgement, for one is considered either Black or Canadian. From within, “African-Canadians question whether the ‘Canadian’ half of the epithet ‘African-Canadian’ is merely a convenience referring to our geographic residency, or whether it hints at an identity” (40). Moreover, while Clarke recognizes that Canadian identity is itself elusive, he also argues that blackness in this place “possesses a Canadian dimension” that can be “recognized by engaging with black cultural works located [in

Canada] or that address black Canadian existence” (10). He adds, however, that Black Canadians do not form a homogenous group: they “are not just ‘black’ and Canadian, but also adherents to a region, speakers of an ‘official’ language (either English or French), disciples of heterogeneous faiths, and related to a particular ethnicity (or ‘national’ group), all of which shape [their] identities” (40). Clarke’s focus on a distinctly Canadian blackness is key to his purpose; as his project sets out to list, discuss, analyse, and canonize Black Canadian writers, Clarke must present a matrix for determining who is included within the Black Canadian context. As a cultural nationalist, Clarke argues for a distinctly Canadian blackness and seeks to situate Black writing within the Canadian canon.

Highly criticized by Clarke, but similarly involved in the project of writing criticism for and about Black Canada, Rinaldo Walcott’s approach to Black Canadian literature is one that frames its discussion with a particular emphasis on diaspora identities. In *Black Like Who?*, Walcott contends that works produced by Black Canadians – be they literature, music, film, or visual art – “are not merely national products, ... they [also] occupy the space of the in-between, vacillating between national borders and diasporic desires, ambitions and disappointments” (Walcott 26). Canadian blackness, for Walcott, necessarily includes an acknowledgement of the diaspora, regardless of whether the Black subject is a recent migrant to Canada or a descendent of generations of Canadian Blacks. Walcott sees the diaspora as a uniting factor and insists that it must be an essential element in any discussion of Canadian blackness: Canada, “[a]s a location for post-emancipation and post-national independence for Caribbean migrants, and more recently for continental African migrants, and as a sanctuary for

escaping enslaved African-Americans and their descendents, [allows for] the multiplicities of blackness... [to] collide in ways that are instructive for the current diasporic theorizing” (40). Walcott positions Canadian blackness within the diaspora, as he feels that there is a “continuing ambivalent place of black peoples in [Canada’s] national imagination” (12). According to Walcott, blackness is othered by the dominant Canadian national narrative that seeks to position Blacks outside of the national imagination. In identifying blackness as Other, as external, or as un-Canadian, the nation disassociates itself from its varied Black populations. This position enables Walcott to explore his diaspora perspective, which is, of course, opposed to nation discourse. The fluidity of the diaspora facilitates a community of belonging for those who have been neglected or negated by national imaginations and identities, and Walcott suggests that “[d]iaspora sensibilities resurrect all that communities and nations destroy, foreclose and prohibit in their dominating narratives of collective belonging” (22).

Myriam Chancy, a Haitian-Canadian scholar who explores writing by Afro-Caribbean female writers, offers a third perspective. Chancy examines the voices of exiled writers through the shared experiences of race, class, sex, and gender and suggests that regardless of their exact origins and their present places of residence, these writers occupy a similar subject position, specifically, that of the Black, female exile (xix). Part literary studies, part women’s studies, and part Black cultural studies, Chancy’s text links various aspects of the Black female existence in exile. Her discussion of the exiled writer is similar to Walcott’s concept of the diaspora community: both insist upon a collectivity that spans national borders to include members in various countries, without negating individually conceived notions of identity. However, their concepts differ as Walcott’s

diaspora includes any Black Canadian, regardless of national origins, while Chancy limits her scope to those who have had the personal experience of leaving the homeland for various political, social, financial, and emotional reasons. Whereas the concept of the diasporic can be applied to all Blacks in all forms of displacement, from subjects who have recently migrated to those who have a family history in Canada, the concept of the exile is limited to those who have experienced border crossings themselves.

Nonetheless, these two concepts are united by the common factor of displacement as a formative experience for Blacks in Canada. Chancy explains the need to emphasize the exilic component of a writer's identity when studying their works:

As a literary critic, I do not believe in divorcing literature from its wider social context: texts by minority writers in general must be explored within their own historical, cultural, social, and philosophical natures. An interdisciplinary approach to literature is instrumental to making visible the marginalized in various aspects of Western societies (xx).

Chancy's project is one that aims to make these marginalized writers visible. Noticing the lack of academic attention paid to Black, female, exiled writers, Chancy reveals that leading contemporary critics have noted the “recent explosion” of works by female Caribbean writers, and their works have been “referred to as ‘postcolonial,’ rather than as an extension of an established Caribbean literary tradition” (xix). The only aspect of female Caribbean writing that should be considered recent is the interest these texts are generating in critical circles; the Caribbean female literary tradition is deep-rooted, but one that critics and theorists are only starting to address. Contemporary writers such as

Makeda Silvera, M. Nourbese Philip, Rosa Guy, Michelle Cliff, and Dionne Brand speak about exile, and their texts aim to secure the voices of Black females and to resist the erasure of their experiences and identities. Chancy posits that they are capable of creating their texts because they are writing from within a marginalized position: “the politics of empowerment, as articulated by these writers, is based on an explicit awareness of the interior life of the oppressed” (xxii). In naming numerous Afro-Caribbean women writers, Chancy suggests that “[a]ll of these writers articulate, from differing geographies of exile, strategies of resistance against imperialist, neocolonial, and patriarchal ideological and social structures, which actively suppress, oppress, marginalize and silence Afro-Caribbean women and women of colour globally” (xxi). Afro-Caribbean female writers have been marginalized in various ways, and recent scholarship seeks to explore their diverse works.

Clarke and Walcott, in their respective discussions of the culture and literature of Canadian blackness, are divided over the Nationalist/Pan-African debate. While Clarke is obviously looking to place blackness within the Canadian context, Walcott strives to create a united diaspora identity to make up for an undefined and unacknowledged Canadian blackness. This discussion is central to current cultural criticism and to Black Canadian literature, as critics and characters alike struggle to identify themselves in relation to national and diasporic positions. Myriam Chancy speaks to the specific experience of exile as a means of considering the writings of Afro-Caribbean women authors. Her focused contemplation of Afro-Caribbean women’s writing is essential to a discussion of Dionne Brand’s work, as it addresses the problems of migration from a gendered and racialized position. While her study is not solely a consideration of

writings from Canada, Chancy's examination of writings by exiled female subjects enables a particular vantage point: "exiled persons have the privilege of looking both forward and backward – forward to a state of equilibrium wherein alienation from the self and the past will be brought to an end and backward to an understanding of where we have come from and how past generations have sought to prevent the struggles with which we are faced in the present" (Chancy 214). The national, diasporic, and exilic perspectives of these three literary critics are applicable to the prose of Dionne Brand. On the one hand, Brand's engagement with blackness in Canada suggests a desire to find a place for Black identity in Canada. In the longing of her Black Canadian characters, there is a search for rootedness, for a belonging here. Moreover, in her oral history project, Brand attempts to historically situate Blacks in Canada, to explore the presence of a specifically Canadian blackness. However, on the other hand, Brand's characterization of Black people is transnational, linking communities and individuals in varied locations of the diaspora. The presence of Africa and a history of slavery and of the community found in other Black people from various locations indicates a belief in diaspora connections. Further still, having herself emigrated from Trinidad, Brand presents numerous instances of the exiled subject, demanding a consideration of physical and mental displacements. I believe that Brand concentrates her energies on presenting a diaspora or exiled position, but it is important to note that she also works towards creating a specifically Canadian blackness. We cannot ignore her efforts to root blackness in Canada and to vocalize this national identity. Rather than suggesting that Brand has selected one of these positions in order to articulate the identities of her Black characters, I would prefer to allow for the consideration of all three positions, with

national, diasporic, and exile theories existing in dialogue. Following Rinaldo Walcott's assertion that Brand's work "offers no orthodoxies on blackness" (45), I will be using all three standpoints as I read and analyse the prose of Dionne Brand.

II. Geographies of Space, Place, and Gender

The literary discussion of national, diasporic, and exilic sensibilities intersects with the concerns of social geography. No discussion of nation or physical displacement is possible without a consideration of borders and movements across, through, and around spaces and places. Cultural and physical geographers alike are part of the expanding study of space and place, and the diversity of the field of study has resulted in an impact on other disciplines. Geography has infiltrated the vocabulary of countless areas of study, such as mathematics, medicine, and literature, propagating the discourse of locality, space, and place. Neil Smith and Cindy Katz suggest that "spatial grammar [is] so fertile for metaphoric appropriation" because, as beings, we mentally place ourselves within a spatial dimension (69). Terms like 'mapping', 'exploring', 'territory' and 'travel' suggest a tangible interaction with a physical geography; however, they are often employed metaphorically by academics of various fields in the course of their own individual studies without any literal connection to territory. Nonetheless, the dissemination of the language of space and place has led to the consideration of social geography in other disciplines.

With the language of geography circulating across various disciplines, the study and application of social geography has become commonplace. The terms 'space' and 'place', often used in conjunction, acquire specific meanings when employed by geographers, and these modes of discourse inform my readings of Dionne Brand's prose

works. While space is “thought to be a universal, more abstract phenomenon,” place is considered “more subjectively defined, existential and particular” (Jonston et al. 582). Kathleen Kirby explains space and place in relation to identity: “Place seems to assume set boundaries that one fills to achieve a solid identity. Place settles space into objects ... [and] perpetuates the fixed parameters of ontological categories ... If place is organic and stable, space is malleable, a fabric of continually shifting sites and boundaries” (19). Patricia Yaeger suggests that “[s]pace is a fragmentary field of action, a jurisdiction scattered and deranged, which appears to be negotiable or continuous but is actually peppered with chasms of economic and cultural disjunctions” (4). In considering these definitions, we can understand that the more general ‘space’ creates the more specific ‘places’ through human interaction (mental, physical, emotional) with particular locations. Place, then, is a space that develops and is developed by the subjectivity and memory of its inhabitants. Places are not only dependent on the individual experience; they also rely on collectivity to determine its particular character. Mike Crang explores the collective influence by basing the distinction between space and place on a temporal scale. He notes that “[s]paces become places as they become ‘time-thickened’. [Places] have a past and a future that binds people together [a]round them” (103). Space signifies a fluid, undefined or unfixed area without emotional, physical, or mental ties to the subject. Space has the potential to be adapted or changed, but it also has the ability to become a place. Place is a determinable space by which subjects identify themselves and those around them, one which is guided by its historical and cultural pasts and presents. Although they differ, no subject is without either space or place. Rather, the subject’s existence is a negotiation of “maintaining place in order to foreground the materiality of

subjectivity, but investing in space to demonstrate and promote the subject's mutability" (Kirby 19). Subjects rely on the concreteness of place to define themselves and their networks, but they also commit to the concept of space, of other locations not yet charged and which offer potentiality and possibility.

Geographers express the notion of place in numerous ways. The term is commonly used to refer to the "surface of the earth," "a unit of space such as a city, province, or country," or as "a particular and specific part of space and to what that may occupy that space" (Relph 3). The breadth of the concept of place – its multiple meanings and implications – explains its prominence in contemporary geography studies. In his book *Place and Placelessness*, E. C. Relph suggests that places are examined in four main ways: to investigate "the range of place experiences and concepts"; to study the "profound psychological links between people and the places which they live in and experience"; to explore "the nature of identity of places and the identity of people with places"; and lastly, to examine "the ways in which sense of place and attachment to place are manifest in the making of places" (i; his emphasis). His text investigates the concept of place and the human attachments that determine emotional and physical locations. However, he also recognizes the "parallel phenomenon of placelessness – that is, the casual eradication of distinct places and the making of standardised landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place" (ii). Relph addresses the paradoxical human desire to both create and destroy places. Meaningful places are created through familiarity, through the subject's interaction with and through the space, but at the same time, the subject's identity and experience are being formed by the place in which it occurs. Obviously, the place one calls home bears great importance on the

subject's development, but it is often overlooked that the subject's growth has a significant impact on the identity of the place. Relph points out that "[h]ome is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community" (39), but he also explains that all places are meaningful as "centres of human existence," areas that are formed by individual and collective recognition and association (43). This line of thinking empowers the subject to see a place for its individuality, for the structures, use of space, distinct communities, and personal experiences located within the specific space.

Relph's concept of placelessness, conversely, explores the possibility of places losing their distinctiveness. With expanding cities, ever-growing populations, and urban sprawl, cities are looking more and more like one another. "Placeless geography, lacking both diverse landscapes and significant spaces," is a universal danger in a mass-producing and expanding, globalized world (77). But placelessness is not solely due to "look-alike landscapes that result from improved communications and increased mobility," as the concept is also caused by an attitude that denies the significance of place (77). Not only are diverse places looking the same, they are also being experienced in similar manners. In North America, the most obvious example of placelessness can be found in the suburbs of major urban centres. The suburbs – known for row upon row of identical housing, strip malls, and more recently big box shopping centres (which have removed the need for independent merchants) – have become spaces of detachment. Relph argues for an acknowledgement of the importance of place and warns us that places can easily revert to spaces.

The investigation of places and imagined spaces is a central concern for the characters of Dionne Brand's prose, and for many of her subjects, navigating space and place as a female presents further specific challenges. Consideration of the female body and, more generally, the feminist perspective are crucial to a discussion of Brand's prose and to the study and application of social geography. In the discussion of space and place, feminist geography explores the othering of the female. Gillian Rose argues that "[c]oncepts of place and space are implicitly gendered in geographical discourse" (*Feminism* 62), explaining that "to think geography – to think within the parameters of the discipline in order to create geographical knowledge acceptable to the discipline – is to occupy a masculine subject position" (*Feminism* 4). Feminist geography seeks to investigate the concerns of geography from a female subject position. Enabling an exploration from a distinctly feminist perspective, this branch dismantles gender hierarchies within the study of geography. Rose explains that "[f]eminist geographers have long argued that the domination of the discipline by men has serious consequences both for what counts as legitimate geographical knowledge and who can produce such knowledge" (2). Doreen Massey adds that geographic concepts and debates "need reconsideration in the light of gender specificity and oppressive gender constructions and relations" ("Space" 182). Just as there are various branches of feminism, seeking to address diverse concerns, there are also multiple feminist geographies, spanning the humanist, social, economic, and cultural fields of the discipline. While their particular scopes vary, the goal remains the same: to enable a consideration of gender as related to and interacting with geography from a female perspective. This is not to suggest that

females are the sole focus; rather, feminist geography is about the gender constructions of both sexes and the implications of such constructions (Massey; “Space” 189).

Embodiment, as a key concern of social geography, invites a feminist analysis of its ramifications for gendered subjects. Embodiment is inescapable for all geographers, as Heidi Nast and Steve Pile explain how “the body is placed ‘geopolitically’: its location is marked by its position with specific historical and geographical circumstances” (2-4). Body and place are inextricable as social and spatial interactions create, and are created by, embodied subjects. Place is then dependent on the body. Elizabeth Grosz explains that the “body is *always already* sexually coded in terms of the meanings each sex has ... for a given cultural situation (which includes class, race and historical factors)” (36; her emphasis). The concept of embodiment is key to feminist approaches to geography because women, in particular, “see their bodies as objects placed in space among other objects” (*Feminism* 146). Embodiment enables the consideration of spaces and places, which “dissolves the split between the mind and the body by thinking through the body” (*Feminism* 146).

The body exists in relation to place, as specific locations are responsible for the ways in which sex, sexuality, class, and ethnicity are received. These different aspects of the body are expressed through and by a place, rooting the subject in the physical and cultural confines of a location. For Black bodies, place plays a particular role, as “images of bodies and movements” are invoked by the diaspora (Gourdine ix). Attached to the Black body is a history of movement, reflecting the multiple places and spaces that have made up the geographical diffusion of Black people. Concomitantly, the cultural codes and expectations of gender and sexuality are evident in the interpellation and expression

of all bodies. Sexuality and gender affect each subject, and the repression or articulation of the body in its multiple expressions is dependent on the social climate of the subject's place.

In her prose, Dionne Brand seeks to counter heteronormative representations of the Black female body, to empower female subjects, and to explore women's heterosexual and homosexual experiences. Because the social and cultural implications of being female and Black are so rooted in cultural exchanges, limitations of the body are taught and learned with every interaction. Even in comfortable social settings, such as a family gathering, Black female subjects experience restrictions based on their bodies. Brand creates restrained characters, women "who / thought [they were] human but got the message, female / and black," and explores the implications of existing in a marginalized space (*No Language* 24). Furthermore, by writing these female subjects, Brand refuses to allow masculine imaginations to create, limit, and secure the definitions and expectations of the female form. Echoing the platform of feminist geographers, one of Brand's central concerns is the articulation of the female body, in all its manifestations, for and by women. In her own terms, Brand explores female sex and sexuality, explaining "the fine art of sensuality, the fleshy art of pleasure and desire," without exploiting her subjects (*Bread* 93). Gendered, sexual, and racialized bodies are of interest to Dionne Brand, and the chapters that follow will consider her writing of such subjects within and across places and spaces.

III. Where Literature and Geography Meet: Writing the Canadian Literary

Landscape

The analysis of the prose of Dionne Brand necessarily requires an awareness of the concepts of space, place, embodiment, and feminist geography. Many fields, including literature, have adopted the language of space and place, as “[s]cholars from a range of disciplines suddenly reinvested in the energetic pursuit of geography,” not just in terms of language but also in terms of key concepts (Yaeger 18). The term ‘spatiality’ is used to “capture the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other,” and it is central to the theory and criticism of Canadian literature (Keith and Pile 6). The simultaneous consideration of identity and location indicates the relation of self and place within Canadian literature and speaks to greater concerns of definition: what is Canadian literature? Just as Clarke and Walcott struggle to define Canadian blackness, Canadian literary criticism seeks to address the components of our national literature. In a sense, Canadian literary criticism has become “‘Canadian studies,’ and through an analysis of ‘Canadian’ symbols, images, and myths, literature is thus able...to function potentially as a means of national identification and a possible force for national unity” (Cameron 126). For a country that identifies itself as having no concrete identity, the formation of a Canadian literary tradition is difficult. Using simile to express this difficulty, Robert Kroetsch explains that “Canadian literature is the autobiography of a culture that insists it will not tell its story” (338). He suggests that it “locates itself against the security of all direct arrivals at self knowledge by elaborate stratagems of border, of periphery, of the distanced centre” (338). In seeing Canadian culture as an unwilling subject, Kroetsch begs the question: what is holding it back? Defining a

national literature for Canada is problematic, literary critic Barry Cameron argues, because it is “a country both linguistically and geographically fragmented that consequently has great difficulty identifying itself either differentially or positively” (126). Jason Wiens, in his analysis of Dionne Brand’s *No Language Is Neutral*, considers Canada’s national literature and Brand’s place within it: “the nationalist project still largely [frames] the production, distribution, and critical reception of a significant proportion of writing in Canada... Yet that project [is] simultaneously challenged, explicitly or implicitly, by writers – including Brand – who [emerge] from differing, transnational, and/or diasporic communities” (84). In noting the multiple identities of Canada’s writers, Wiens suggests that “Brand’s oeuvre demonstrates, politically and aesthetically, a closer identification with Latin American and Caribbean poetic traditions than with those of North America” (82). How, then, does one situate Brand within Canadian literature? The hesitations behind categorizing literature by nationality manifest themselves in questions of definition: in a country as multicultural as Canada, how does a national literature account for its diverse writers? What are the criteria of the Canadian aesthetic? Lorna Irvine and Paula Gilbert Lewis note that “packaging cultural products by nationality can encourage holistic readings that often lead to erroneous generalizations” (325). Rather than looking for a unifying, all-encompassing tradition, many critics look to thematic analyses of works. While there are innumerable themes within the multifarious literatures of the nation, the landscape and the impact of the physical environment are employed by many Canadian writers. From the early writings of Samuel Hearne and Susanna Moodie to contemporary writers like Dionne Brand, many Canadian writers invoke geography as subject matter or a theme. Margaret

Atwood, in her critical work *Survival: Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, notes that the “central symbol for Canada ... is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance,” suggesting it originates in the settlers’ need to survive “in the face of ‘hostile’ elements” (32).

Contemplating the prevalence of landscape in Canadian literature, Robert Kroetsch explains that “[l]andscape is a question of appalling weight in Canadian writing, partly because there is in Canada so much landscape, with no accepted tradition, no code, if you will, for its being read. Or perhaps, because of that, there is no landscape in Canada, no way to translate” the environment (341). Whatever the reason, the geographic considerations of landscape and climate are key thematic devices in many works of Canadian literature.

Dionne Brand, too, draws on elements of Canada’s northern climate to articulate a particularly Canadian existence. Her depictions of winter in Canada, for example, reinforce the distance and coldness of the nation’s white population towards the Black characters, and the inherent but unspoken racism of Canadian cities is cloaked in the white, chilling snow of Toronto, Sudbury, or Montreal. Although the focus of this thesis is on the prose of Dionne Brand, I would like to briefly frame my analysis with a consideration of the physical environment in one of Brand’s books of poetry, *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardinal in Defense of Claudia*. Partly a meditation on the experience of surviving winter in Canada and partly a reinvention of an historical subject through “poems of love and politics from a feminist and dialectical stand,” this hybrid collection of epigrams unites feelings of unrequited love with the despair and desire felt under the particular conditions of a Canadian winter (McTair iv). Brand’s speaker, in the section of poems entitled “Winter Epigrams,” vacillates between anger

and disbelief in her encounters with the Canadian climate and the equally cold inhabitants of the country. She organizes her poems to reflect a separation between us/exiles and them/Canadians, one that projects a divided country. The speaker observes that Canadians “think it’s pretty, / the falling of leaves,” but she sees the violence and pain involved in the truth: “something is dying!” (*Winter* 3). In equating the loss of life with the changing of seasons, winter is given a violent character. This association with violence is apparent in her depiction of a Montreal winter that enacts the sexual abuse that some of her characters experience in Canada:

snow is raping the landscape

Cote de Neige is screaming

writhing under

winter’s heavy body

any poem about Montreal in the winter is pornography (*Winter* 6)

Winter takes a dominating, violating role over the landscape, and this power dynamic is expressed throughout Brand’s works in various forms. The rapist/victim relationship attributed to winter is similarly expressed in Brand’s works in terms of gender (male/female), ethnicity (white/not-white), and class (affluent/poor). The association of winter with the harsh realities of racial, gender, and class discrimination is explicit in the fifty-first poem of the collection. It narrates the female speaker’s encounter with a racist male at the Montreal train station. This experience, which is revisited later in *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, leaves her paralysed with emotion. Instead of rebutting with force or language, the speaker is frozen. The shocking experience of being verbally abused disarms the speaker’s ability to defend herself with her practiced responses. While the

poem does not describe the seasonal conditions in detail, Brand associates winter with racism by placing the poem within the collection. The inclusion of this particular poem – a poem that documents a racially motivated assault – in the section entitled “Winter Epigrams” is not an accident; the positioning of the poem demonstrates the use of the metaphor of winter to express the discriminatory and racist attitudes of Canadian citizens. Furthermore, in an act that seems contradictory, the subject of the poem embodies the seasonal setting, admitting that in the wake of the assault she stood, “legs stiff as the cold outside,” unable to react (*Winter* 17). In describing her temporary paralysis, the subject aligns herself with the outside, complicating the symbolic meaning of physical geography within Brand’s collection. This simile forces the subject to embody the weather conditions, as winter invades the subject. Ambiguity is furthered when, in poem thirty-four, the speaker admits that it is the discomfort of the season that prompts her to write. She addresses winter with both appreciation and dislike:

comrade winter,
if you weren’t there
and didn’t hate me so much

I probably wouldn’t write poems (*Winter* 11)

The speaker’s muse is concurrently her enemy, and the link between society and climate suggests that winter is not the sole reason why she writes. If the social realities of life in Canada are represented and explored through a discussion of the conditions of winter, then it can be said that the speaker is also encouraged to write poetry by the discomforts of racism, classism, gender discrimination, and homophobia that exist in Canadian society.

While themes such as landscape or the environment offer interesting readings of texts and significant conversations among writers, thematic interpretations do not allow for the definition of a Canadian literary tradition. Functioning on analytical and cultural levels, thematic readings enable the grouping of similar texts or subjects, but they have the potential “to leave out literature and art that do not conform to the category under discussion, [to promote] dangerous cultural stereotypes, and [to encourage] the passive acceptance of so-called national traits” (Irvine and Lewis 327). The difficulty that critics have in articulating a specifically Canadian literature significantly echoes the works by cultural theorists who attempt to express Canadian blackness. These dialogues among scholars overlap in my investigation of Dionne Brand’s prose, as her writing is necessarily rooted in considerations of literature and blackness in Canada. The Pan-African/Nationalist debate of Black cultural theorists mirrors the thematic/national considerations of critics of Canadian literature, as both Pan-African and thematic arguments attempt to engage in the similarities of the subjects, be they ethnic or thematic. The nationalist stance on Black identity and the national approach to literary criticism articulate their subjects, both people and texts, by their national identifications. Both of these theories attempt to find some united means of viewing the multifarious subjects through a national lens. I offer no answers to the debates that exist in the considerations of Canadian literature and Black Canadian cultural and literary studies; rather, these intersecting, overlapping, and contradictory theories exist as a framework for my investigation of the prose of Dionne Brand.

Considering questions of identity from within the diaspora and the nation, issues of place and space, processes of embodiment, and competing conceptualisations of

Canadian literature, I will be examining the prose of Dionne Brand through the lenses of current Black Canadian literary studies and contemporary social geography theory.

Drawing on both emergent fields of criticism, I will explore the foci of history and language to investigate the relation of place, space, and identity. In chapter one, I will examine *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), *No Burden to Carry* (1991), *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988), and *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) to reflect on Brand's engagement with history. To explore the role of language in the construction and articulation of identity and place in chapter two, I will focus on *Bread Out of Stone* (1994) and *In Another Place, Not Here* (1997). Lastly, in chapter three, in an attempt to consider the breadth of her prose, I will look at her latest novel, *What We All Long For* (2005), to explore the continuities and discontinuities this new work presents.

Drawing on a number of different texts, my next chapter considers how subjects and characters in the prose of Dionne Brand create, relate, and interact with their personal and collective pasts. The works of writing discussed include a novel, an oral history, short stories, and an autobiographical text, and each work presents a different venue for historical investigations.

Documenting the Past: The Spaces and Places of Personal and Collective History

Geography is no longer simply viewed as “the physical stage upon which the drama of history is enacted or as the framework of physical frontiers and political boundaries within which history is to some extent contained” (Baker 16). Rather, scholars realize and investigate the multiple areas in which history and geography overlap and intersect. The process of narrating history is, therefore, also an exercise in geography, as locating the subject in time and space is inherent to any articulation of the past. In Dionne Brand’s prose, the dialogue between self and history occupies centre stage as her characters navigate the temporal and the spatial in their quest for self-discovery. Personal and collective, recent and ancient, real and imagined, these multi-layered and complex pasts contain and fashion the identities of her subjects. Additionally, Brand’s engagement with history raises questions of truth and reality, questions that speak to the greater social issues of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. As Hayden White notes, narrative “entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (ix). No retelling of events occurs without expressing, on some level, the narrator’s personal ideologies. Moreover, the post-modern concept of history rejects the possibility of presenting a truthful account, of retelling events and realities in an unequivocally objective manner. The “infinite number of interpretations and understandings through individual and personal readings” of texts or experiences makes historical inaccuracy insurmountable (Butlin 65). In exploring an historical engagement as a theme, Brand is not only questioning history as truth but also employing an historical discourse to give voice to those accounts of the past that have been silenced or marginalized. The result is threefold: her works interrogate the

validity of existing histories that proclaim ultimate truth, draw attention to silenced voices, and express other perspectives in order to represent different historical experiences. Ultimately, these unspoken and neglected histories are a means to locate, cultivate, and express the identities of her subjects. Brand's writings reflect the subject's complex relationship with history and aim to explore the multiple manners in which the identity of every being is inextricably linked to collective and individual pasts. Significantly, these pasts are situated in various spaces and places, each with its own dynamic.

Complicated by the very process of engaging with history, Dionne Brand's artistic project is one that articulates ignored narratives. Because "[n]o tender archaeologist will mend [these] furious writings" and render them acknowledged, Brand speaks to and for the voices who remain unheard (*Land To Light On* 16). These purposes are exposed and explored through autobiographical, biographical, and fictional works, as each work enables a particular engagement with history and geography. Her project is at once history and historical fiction, joining historical research, real lives, and personal narratives with fictionalized events, short stories, and subjects throughout her extensive body of work. Demonstrating the play between fact and fiction, Brand's 1999 novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* relies on historical data to present its characters. This poetic novel that follows the lineage of one family, opens with the story of Marie-Ursule, a rebellious slave who organizes a mass suicide to protest the social hierarchy of slavery and to punish her slave owner. Marie-Ursule is the ancestor the rest of the characters have in common, and as their stories span temporally from the 1820s to the 1990s and spatially from the Caribbean to Europe to North America, their personal stories are rooted

in history. In her acknowledgements section, Dionne Brand indicates a reliance on several history books, including “E. L. Joseph’s *History of Trinidad*; Eric Williams’ *Documents on British West Indian History, 1807-1833*; John La Guerre’s *Calcutta to Caroni*; Bridgette Brereton’s *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783-1962*; [and] V. S. Naipaul’s *The Loss of Eldorado: A History*,” for the inspiration and authentication of her narrative (*At the Full* 301). The characters are created out of these diverse histories, and their experiences are contextualized by the social conditions of this historical and geographical place. Moreover, Brand draws on historical figures to write this book. She notes that “[s]ome of the names of enslaved people were taken from the accounts of a planned slave uprising in Trinidad in 1806,” and she admits to using “the respective punishments they received after its failure” in her fictional work (302). While this insertion of names and punishments may not be completely historically accurate – Brand tells us in her acknowledgements that the names and punishments are real, but she does not elaborate to tell the reader whether the names and punishments correspond to one another – it does constitute an attempt to give wider access to often neglected realities. A less abstract invocation of historical data occurs with the use of an historical figure’s voice. Brand explains that the “wickedly elegant observations” of King George III’s geographer, Thomas Jeffery, were vocalized by one of her other characters (302). She creates a fictional character, a Black slave, but provides him with authentic comments, comments that were made more than a hundred years earlier by a white man of significant rank and position. The observations are historical data, but their vocalization is a subversion of the historical practice as it reassigns power and agency to an historically underprivileged subject. Such appropriations and reassignments occur a few

times, although the other instances are less political. “[A]ccounts and details of First World War soldiers” and excerpts from letters come from actual documents, and they are rearticulated through the narratives found within *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (302). In the same vein, Brand takes real historical figures and rewrites them without changing their ethnicity, situation, or rank. The most important use of an historical figure, data, or words appears in the character of Marie-Ursule. She is the ancestress of all the other characters, and it is her rebellious act that begins the narrative. This character and her revolt are fabricated out of the details of a slave, Thisbe, who organized a mass suicide. Borrowing the slave’s circumstance, actions, and punishment, Brand rewrites her story. Thisbe’s final words, “This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered,” are reattributed to the fictional Marie-Ursule (24;302). The fictionalization of history that occurs in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* rearranges the manner in which narratives are expressed. Ultimately, this creative rendering of lived experiences enables agency for previously disenfranchised subjects, and it draws attention to narratives which are relatively unknown or unspoken.

At the Full and Change of the Moon is but one of Brand’s prose endeavours that seeks to explore concepts of history. In this chapter, I will examine Brand’s historical engagement through a work of oral history, a collection of short stories, and an auto/biographical work. The diversity of style and genre is indicative of the multiple forms of historical engagement, as each form reveals a different aspect of writing and thinking history. The oral history, *No Burden to Carry*, offers first-hand accounts and acts as a snapshot of life in Canada. Similarly, the auto/biographical work, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, presents a personal meditation on the Black subject’s relation to

Africa and Canada. Locating the subject within the historical context of the slave trade, *A Map to the Door of No Return* is at once history and personal narrative. The collection of short stories *Sans Souci and Other Stories* differs in that the fiction does not seek to document historical events. Rather, the volume offers stories that highlight personal interactions and considerations of individual and collective histories. Seeking to explore interaction with history, both ancient and recent, these stories are more fluid in their articulations of the past. All of the works discussed, however, focus on the reconsideration of a specifically Black history, and they seek to position the Black subject in the context of spaces and places that are defined by collective and individual pasts.

The significance of this historical focus is foregrounded by the present interest of contemporary Black Canadian literary studies in retrieving and preserving Black narratives. Literary theorists and critics who specialize in Black Canadian literature aim to draw attention to the presence of Black Canadian literature and history, and the works of Dionne Brand contribute to this objective by attempting to reconstruct a history that spans Africa, the Caribbean, and Canada. The places and spaces that make up her triumvirate of locations function independently and in conjunction with each other. Canada and the Caribbean are explored simultaneously as places lacking legitimized and accepted histories for their subjects and as spaces of potentiality; Africa is presented in terms of space as a distant, ancestral past, as a memory one never really experienced. All three locations contribute to the identity formation of Brand's Black subjects, and these characteristics simultaneously exist independently and in relation to one another. To investigate Brand's project of history, one must acknowledge the spatial and temporal breadth of her subjects' relationship with the past. The subjects of Dionne Brand's prose,

whose very identities are determined by history, experience life through these interacting locations and pasts. By examining *No Burden to Carry*, *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, and *A Map to the Door of No Return* and keeping in mind the overlapping nature of history and fiction demonstrated by *At The Full and Change of the Moon*, the present chapter explores the mental and physical intersections of identity, history, and location, and it proceeds in three sections. The first section will explore the subjects' relation to Canada, opening with a consideration of *No Burden to Carry*. With the Black presence in Canada established, this section will then analyse "Train to Montreal," found in *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. These works speak to both the presents and the pasts of blackness in Canada. The second section will focus on the subject's physical return to the Caribbean and the mental and emotional processes involved in doing so. In looking at the short story "Sketches in Transit...Going Home," I will investigate the subject's complex relationship with Canada and the Caribbean, as revealed by characters who have experienced physical displacement. Last, the third section will address the subject's relation to Africa. In considering the auto/biographical work *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the short stories "St. Mary's Estate" and "At the Lisbon Plate," the chapter will discuss the subject's distant yet present ties to Africa and consider this other continent as an historical space.

I. "I was born here, my parents and my grandparents too"¹

The present, for many of Dionne Brand's subjects, lies in Canada, the cold, vast country that alienates its Black populations with polite racism and historical denial. The inhabitants of this country seldom voice straightforward racial slurs, but the barely-veiled

¹Addie Aylestock in *No Burden to Carry* by Dionne Brand. (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991) 53

discriminatory actions and racial profiling, combined with the country's denial of its own slave past and neglect of Black Canadian history, leave the Black subject in search of roots. While Brand writes fiction describing the realities of Canadian life, she also writes non-fiction in order to contextualize the history of Blacks in Canada, specifically the working lives of Black Canadian women. The result of research and interviews, *No Burden to Carry* is an oral history of the lives of selected Black women who worked in Ontario from the 1920s to the 1950s. Documenting everything from job descriptions to social relations, this text engages with a relatively ignored subject. Brand opens her text with this eloquent criticism:

The history of Black people in Canada, let alone the history of Black women in Canada, has not been taken up by many Canadian scholars.

Where information exists on Black history, it is usually general. Analyses, though well-intended, have been sweeping in their approach, as if a single work could uncover the complexity of the existence of any people, or have taken the view of Canada as simply a haven from United States slavery (*No Burden* 11).

Brand's critique of the few previous attempts to record Black Canadian history sets the foundation for her own project and leads to an articulation of one of her key premises: the conviction that specificity is the key to presenting and representing her subjects in a fair, manageable, and detailed fashion. Instead of approaching the Black Canadian population as a "genderless group," Brand makes a distinction and decides to focus on the history of "doubly hidden" Black female subjects (*No Burden* 12). In other research and studies, Brand argues, "Black History has tended to excise the place of black women in it [thus]

to recover Black women as historical actors is not only to clarify the historical record but ultimately to recover a revolutionary method for feminist struggle and Black struggle” (13). It is important that Brand focuses on the narratives of Black women in Canada, for female perspectives are different from those usually foregrounded in the critical literature, “both in describing the geography of the place and in the recounted activities and social relations” of these places (Massey; “Double” 113). *No Burden to Carry* aims to address and examine one facet of the overlooked topic of Black Canadian women’s history. Finding a history and giving a voice to the narratives that have heretofore been silenced not only documents a missing past but also creates a place in which the gendered and racialized subject can exhibit multiple identities.

Because “Canadian state institutions and official narratives attempt to render blackness outside of those same narratives,” there is a need to document a Black presence within Canada’s national history (Walcott 44). The unspoken histories of Canada’s Black populations allow blackness to be represented as Other, as outsider, and as immigrant and exile. In the Canadian context, Black identity and Canadian identity are considered mutually exclusive. The erasure of Black narratives, combined with “[t]he perpetual, white denial of Canada’s own history of slavery, segregation, and anti-black discrimination accents black invisibility” and denies the four hundred year history of Black people in Canada (Clarke 35). To place blackness within Canada’s borders, Brand investigates the pasts of her subjects from their own perspectives. Through research and interviews she presents first-hand accounts of Black women who lived and worked through the twentieth century in Canada. Rooting her subjects in Canada’s history, Brand juxtaposes personal pasts “[i]n opposition to the calcified Canadian nation

narrative” that excludes these same subjects (*A Map* 70). While not all of her subjects were born in Canada, the majority of the women interviewed come from generations of Black Canadians. Almost all of the interviewees immediately situate themselves through family history, locating themselves within the Canadian context and identifying themselves through their Canadian origins. The first order of business is to trace their roots, be they immediate or ancestral. Many identify both their parents and grandparents as Canadians and hint at longstanding family histories in Canada. However, not all subjects are able to discuss their personal lineages. For example, Gwen Johnston has trouble tracing her lineage past her grandmother. Of her great-grandmother, she confesses that she “hesitate[s] to say” any details of her ancestor’s arrival as she doesn’t “know exactly how [or when] they did get here” (*No Burden* 159). The lack of detail bespeaks the greater problem of documenting histories of Black subjects in Canada. Another subject, Esther Hayes, complains that not all forms of history are recorded; while Euro-centric records detail conquests and land claims, there is a neglect of Black history. She recognizes that “Negroe history is not the recording of battles. Negroe history is altogether different: it is not written” (195). In this statement, Hayes notes that the distinguishing feature of Black history is that it is not recorded. Whether Hayes is suggesting that it is unwritten because it is deemed unworthy by historians or that it is unwritten because it does not necessarily conform to this manner of documentation remains unsaid. Regardless, for the historian, this presents a problem: how does one engage in the subject of Black Canadian history when there are hesitant or uncertain oral accounts and few written resources? In acknowledging the gaps in Black Canadian history, we see the need for further research, greater attention, and present action.

Esther's sister, Eleanor, provides a solution to the problems facing Black Canadian history: "Negroe history is being made now; Negroe history is current" (195). She contends that the history of Black Canadians is very much alive, if not recorded in the annals of our national history, certainly so in the minds and hearts of the members of the Black communities across Canada. Moreover, this statement sets a precedent for Black Canadians living and experiencing the present. Because this history is being made now, because it is current, Hayes encourages the documentation and appreciation of Black Canadian lives, realities, and accomplishments.

In interviewing fifteen subjects, Brand works towards preserving the narratives of these women. Their experiences are captured in order to document what is known to them, in order to share the realities of being a Black Canadian woman in the twentieth century: for example, Violet Blackman details her involvement with the Universal Negro Improvement Association; Addie Aylestock narrates her involvement in the church, studying the bible, working as a deaconess, and finally being ordained as the first black female pastor in Canada; describing her job in a munitions factory, Grace Fowler explains how employment opportunities opened up for black women during the war. In participating in this project and describing their lives, these women are heeding the warning found in Gwen Johnson's interview: of her unknown family history, she says that "old people often didn't tell you very much," leaving blanks in both personal and collective histories (159). In telling their personal stories, these fifteen women are not only securing their family narratives, but also piecing together a part of the social history of Blacks in Canada.

Following the lead of “Older, Stronger, Wiser” (1989), a film that documents the interviews of these same subjects, *No Burden to Carry* demonstrates the intersections of gender and race in the lives of its subjects. Furthermore, the project lends authority to subjects who have a history of being silenced, a history so long that it has been internalized; the greatest “hurdle to surmount,” Brand writes, “was the notion that women could not speak as authorities” (*No Burden* 34). The subjects, themselves, deem their own narratives unworthy of documentation, unknowingly demonstrating the psychological repercussions of colonial oppression and gender subjugation. For this reason, *No Burden to Carry* is of even greater importance. In identifying “gender as a fundamental category of analysis” and in exploring a particularly Black history in Canada, Brand’s historical project incorporates the multiplicity of each subject (*We’re Rooted Here* 6).

The documentary approach of *No Burden to Carry* is but one of Brand’s methods of exploring Black history. While this project is certainly her most direct approach to engaging with the history of Blacks in Canada, her short stories provide semi-fictionalized accounts of life for the Black female subject. The oral history project *No Burden to Carry* allows Brand to present first-hand accounts of the Black female’s experiences in Canada, but *Sans Souci and Other Stories* and the genre of short fiction allow for greater freedoms. Applying metaphor and taking creative liberties, Brand is able to explore the history and social realities of the Black female subject creatively. Although they differ in style, both genres, fiction and non-fiction, explore concepts of history and present gendered and racialized experience in specified places and imagined spaces. “Train to Montreal,” a short story that follows a female subject’s position in one

city, Toronto, and her movement, via train, to another city, Montreal, expresses the collective difficulties of Black women in Canada. Through characterization, Brand manages to express experiences common to these racialized and gendered subjects.

“Train to Montreal” opens in a Toronto jazz club, with a description of the unnamed central character’s interaction with the music. An expression of collective pains, tragedies, triumphs, and histories, the jazz music envelops the character in a frenzy of sounds and feelings. In the music, she hears history: she “heard Malcolm. Angela went to jail. ... all of it is in this little room and [it] is what [she is] listening to” (*Sans Souci* 16). The music is more than entertainment; it is an interpretation of history, Black history, and it forces the listeners to consider the past. Using music as history, Brand signals the presence of untraditional documentation. History, here, is unspoken; instead, it is expressed musically, in a form that only some can understand. In presenting a collective history through jazz, Brand suggests an alternative mode of documentation. Jazz, which is renowned for improvisation, serves as an example of Ester Hayes’ unwritten forms of history. The musical interpretation of a collective history that includes slavery, discrimination, subordination, and sexualization leaves the subject of the story with conflicted feelings: “Jazz concerts always threw her into a pit of a mood. After, she would come out, a wry smile jerking the muscles on her face, as if some accustomed tragedy had occurred. It had been replayed” (*Sans Souci* 17). In her initial reaction, there is a sense of mourning for past tragedies; however, there is also healing and empowerment through the performance. The expression is a testament of strength, and the subject suggests that the music was “an escape [which] had been rehearsed” (*Sans Souci* 17). In the telling of the past, there is hope for the future and an escape from

what plagues the present. Vocalization prohibits erasure, and knowing the past means knowing the self. But these feelings of hope are temporary: once the music has ended, the subject realizes that “outside [the club] nothing had changed” (*Sans Souci* 17). The history expressed through jazz does not make an impact on the outside world, as it is only heard by those in the club. The articulation of history has not altered the present, and upon leaving the club, the protagonist is faced with the same realities of sexism and racism. The rage expressed by the musicians stays with her, and “[s]he [emerges] looking at the city, shouting, sometimes aloud” (*Sans Souci* 17).

This introduction is central to Brand’s engagement with history. While introducing the main character, Brand also presents a historical context for the subject. Moreover, this context bespeaks a greater, collective history that is addressed and expressed through non-traditional means. Through jazz, Brand enables the expression of a collective black history to situate her subject temporally and racially. She is located in time by a collective past, by all that has come before her, and she is also marked by the specific people and socio-political events that make up this past. The expressions are indicative of a specifically black history. The physical landmarks of Downsview and Union Station further locate the subject in Toronto, home to Canada’s largest Black population. All of these markers exist in the introduction, and they serve to root the Black female subject in the Canadian context. This contextualization is essential for an interpretation of the experiences and feelings to follow.

The bulk of the story narrates the subject’s train excursion to Montreal. Throughout, there is a juxtaposition between the protagonist’s internal considerations of her personal life and her thoughts regarding the external threats she is exposed to on the

trip. For example, she considers sex with the man she is going to visit and the state of other relationships, but her body and mind cannot escape considering the inherent dangers faced by a Black woman in Canada. Her racialized and gendered meditations begin with an acknowledgment of the white faces that surround her. She is surprised by the mass of Caucasian passengers, and in noticing their whiteness she understands her own blackness. Certain of segregation, she is anxious at the thought of there not being “a single black face to sit with,” and she anticipates “all the other seats, except the one beside her, filling up” (*Sans Souci* 19). Brand presents a complex character, a subject who is insecure and defensive. The subject is just as capable as those who threaten her of making assumptions about others. Instinctively, she is uncomfortable with the universal whiteness of the other passengers, and when a young man does sit down beside her, she is certain that “she’d met his type” before (20). In her head, she identifies herself as different and interpellates her seatmate as a type. In talking with him, the subject realizes that “she hated him already. She realize[s] that she had hated him, even before he came onto the train” (21). Their interaction makes her feel unsure of herself, makes her aware of own uncertainty, and makes her conscious of an inescapable sadness. This sadness, which “seemed hundreds of years long,” is her “plump, well-fed torturer”; it is her history, laden with struggle, and it is her burden to carry (22). Brand suggests that subjects investigate the existence, and by extension the history, of the self only when faced with the Other.

As her seatmate disembarks the train in Kingston, the character is left to consider her past, but she is threatened by more than history: the present also exists as a menacing force. The unknown white faces are intimidating, and her discomfort is heightened by

the presence of many children. As she hears them make songs out of ethnic slurs, she is afraid she will become their next target. Brand presents a world of danger for the Black subject, with even children acting as threats. “Feeling the eyes of strangers turning toward her” and avoiding the drunken “[e]yes lighting up into a leer at her,” the subject is aware of her race and gender and of the vulnerability caused by both (*Sans Souci* 24-25). Race marks her as different from the others, and her sex makes her a target for the inebriated, lecherous men onboard. The insecurity and defensiveness exhibited by the protagonist illustrates the circumstances in which the Black female subject experiences identity formation. Hailed as exotic and sexual, Black Canadian women are interpellated as objects. These same men make her uncomfortable on the platform with their loud, almost violent, cavorting. She “quicken[s] her pace instinctively” as she passes them, but cannot escape the slurs in response to her renunciation of one of these men (27). Loud enough for all to hear, the rejected man calls her “Nigger! Whore!” (27). Hearing him repeat his words over and over again, the protagonist is debased and humiliated. Attacked doubly, both on the basis of ethnicity and gender, this character feels “her ears ringing as if slapped” (27). Outraged, “[s]he looked back to say something, but only said it in looking” (27). She is unable to counter such violence and hatred, “[a]pologising to her past for not striking him or cursing back, for not hurting, wounding all of them standing on the escalator” (27). Significantly, her shame exists out of concern for her past, a collective past, rather than for her own humiliation. All those who have come before her deserve apologies, and the protagonist feels it is her responsibility to defend her history. While others can walk away, she cannot forget.

The experiences of this trip – the shock of being the only Black person on the train, the disagreement with her seat mate, the staring eyes, the lecherous advances, and the violent outburst of slurs – are examples of the Black existence in Canada. In the future, they will become a part of jazz. This story presents personal and collective history simultaneously, and the unnamed character's personal experiences aboard the train are indicative of the greater Black experience in Canada. As *No Burden to Carry* presents the “buried or new visions” of history “other than those of the dominant culture,” “Train to Montreal” fictionalizes common experiences for Black women in Canada (*Bread* 136). Brand engages with the historical project in the two genres of fiction and non-fiction, mirroring the difference between space and place. On one hand, *No Burden to Carry* is a fixed, concrete articulation of the Black female subject, one that exists in the social and cultural confines of reality. Much like a subject's engagement with place, there are discernable personal interactions that allow for these particular histories to be expressed. On the other hand, the short story “Train to Montreal,” as fiction, partakes of the qualities associated with space. Both fiction and space offer potentiality, as there are no fixed or determined boundaries. Fiction is an imaginative space, wherein histories can be created and considered. Both fiction and non-fiction allow for the articulation of internalized and experienced threats due to ethnicity and gender, and the texts, while very different in style and format, present a glimpse of the pasts and presents of Canadian blackness.

The project of inserting blackness into the Canadian narrative is more complicated than bringing to the foreground Black Canadian narratives and experiences. Aside from articulating the denied histories of Canadian Blacks, a primary concern in

representing a Black presence is addressing the heterogeneity of that population. Necessarily, blackness in Canada includes a relationship with other places. Drawing on the varied discourses regarding Canadian blackness, Brand's works can be framed by a small-scale version of the Pan-African/Nationalist debate that exists within the country's borders, a debate that has been vocalized recently by George Elliot Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott. Canada expresses the presence of blackness by either refuting distinct identities or exoticizing differences. For Walcott, it is impossible to be defined within the Canadian context: "blackness in Canada is largely imagined as [B]lack....[with] 'Caribbean' [acting as] a pseudonym for blackness" (135). In equating Canadian blackness with Black and noting that Caribbean is synonymous with blackness, the Canadian concept of blackness is one that locates all of its diverse subjects outside of the nation in one united group. Blackness is both removed and homogenized, as populations of diverse origins are lumped together, denied cultural specificity, and placed outside of the imagined national space. The problem of the homogenization of distinct black populations is equalled by the inverse form of identification: the exoticization of particular peoples. Specifically in the arts, Black Canadians of Caribbean decent are given particular attention. Caribbean-Canadian authors and musicians garner recognition for their distinctiveness, while other forms of blackness are neglected; the "hyper-visibility of Caribbean blackness makes indigenous black Canadians [and Blacks of other descents] invisible" (Walcott 46). Regardless of whether blackness in Canada is deemed united or individualistic, it remains Other. While *No Burden to Carry* centres on the insertion of blackness into a broader Canadian history and "Train to Montreal" presents a subject who is defined as a Black Canadian, much of Brand's body of work focuses on a

particular form of Canadian blackness. The majority of her Black Canadian subjects are of Caribbean descent, a characteristic that locates them in a specific category of Blacks. Although there exists a long history of blackness in Canada, the manner in which Canadian Blacks of Caribbean descent deal with the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of emigration is at the centre of Brand's publications. The next two sections will address the complex relations with these other locations, with the Caribbean and Africa figuring into Brand's prose as places and spaces of identification.

II. "This place so full of your absence"²

In Canada, the history of exile and diaspora causes places to lose their discrete boundaries, with subjects, in individual and collective memory, invoking and recreating other places. For Brand, the Black subject experiences the dynamic relation of place, as Africa, the Caribbean, and Canada coexist within the subject. The physical and emotional processes of exile and immigration are common thematic concerns for all diaspora and transnational writings, expressing the histories of the subjects through journey. Rinaldo Walcott suggests that Caribbean-Canadian culture is always viewed in the context of another place, and that "[t]his elsewhere is both conditioned by an imagined diasporic collective history and by the nation-state's demand for black people to belong elsewhere" (134). As the latter restates a national model that denies blackness as Canadian, the former speaks to the common desire for a collective history, one that acknowledges national and emotional ties to varied locations. The search for a collective history leads non-Canadian-born subjects back to their places of origin and beyond, to places and spaces that evoke complex and contradictory sentiments. As "Black diasporic

² Dionne Brand. No Language Is Neutral. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998) 30.

utterances are cluttered with references to how their histories relate to other histories of black people elsewhere,” the collective and individual pasts of the Caribbean and Africa figure into the identities of Black, Caribbean-Canadian subjects (Walcott 35). In Brand’s texts, these other histories are both experienced and imagined; for Caribbean-Canadian subjects in the short stories of *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, the Caribbean stands as a lived past while Africa is reflected upon as an ancestral history.

The mental and physical returns to the Caribbean are rife with feelings of nostalgia, longing, fear, deception, and disappointment. For the immigrant or exiled subject who lives in Canada, the Caribbean is a reminder of a past willingly left behind, of a life that was exchanged for another in Canada. Black Caribbean-Canadian subjects often long for their Caribbean roots: there is an identification with the sounds, smells, flavours, gestures, and sentiments of Caribbean life, one that situates the immigrant or exile in a state of nostalgia. A lack of belonging in Canada conjures up an enhanced identification with the Caribbean, but the “trope of Caribbean in Canada denies the complexities of Caribbean-ness and therefore belies complex understandings of the place” (Walcott 135). These immigrant subjects cannot be presented so easily; there is more to them than nostalgia. Best demonstrated by Brand’s short story “Sketches in Transit...Going Home,” the immigrant or exiled subject has a complicated relationship with the Caribbean and engages in the performance of various roles.

Sans Souci and Other Stories collects snapshots of the play between the national identifications of Canada and the Caribbean within the Black subject. Throughout the collection, characters struggle to situate themselves in both contexts, and they demonstrate the border crossings between “inside and outside, past and present, space

and place” (Walter, 23). For those characters who are located in Canada, the movement between locations and the ever-present sentiments of longing and belonging express a presence in absence. The Caribbean is alive in the subject’s consciousness: it is heard in the voices, felt in the music and dance moves, seen in the gestures, and, most of all, understood in the longing of each character. Transparent and present at all times, this desire for another place, the Caribbean, situates these characters in an in-between space.

“Sketches in Transit...Going Home” presents the emotional experience of the exile’s physical movement between place of residence and place of origin. Whereas home once signified a “stable physical centre of one’s universe – a safe place to leave and return to,” the global dismantling of social, mental, and physical boundaries has transformed the concept of home into a “far more mobile conception” (Rapport 268). Home exists “in a routine set of practices, in a repetition of habitual interactions, in a regularly used personal name, in a story carried around in one’s head,” rather than in the physical dimension of space (Rapport 268). Furthermore, for subjects who move between various locations, multiple places are referred to as ‘home,’ and this site of identification becomes a shifting referent. In “Sketches in Transit,” as Brand’s immigrant subjects make the return journey to the Caribbean, nostalgia and dread interact as the characters consider the concepts of home. The Caribbean and Canadian lives of the characters interact, and the story exemplifies the inherent performativity of identity. The subjects necessarily enact multiple roles: that of a native, that of an exile, that of a Canadian alleged success. Further complicated by the expectations of others, the subjects are located in a liminal space, somewhere between Canada and the Caribbean, between interior self and projected self. This liminal space is symbolically represented by the

journey itself. The sketches of the individuals are provided within the confines of an airplane. In the air, between departure and arrival, the characters are given moments of agency and expression, moments that demonstrate their complex relations to place and their distinct identities. In occupying this in-between space, the subjects explore concepts of belonging, nostalgia, and truth.

Through the five characters, Brand engages with personal history and expresses collective experiences of the Caribbean immigrant subject. A third person omniscient voice narrates their thoughts as they travel between Toronto and the Caribbean and investigates identity formation and place through the character sketches of Iron, a man who expresses his sexuality and his sexual prowess at any opportunity; Jasmine, a woman who has been duped by a Caribbean man seeking Canadian citizenship; Tony, a young student who is returning to the Caribbean for summer break; Shanti, an illegal immigrant who is being deported; and Ayo, a Trinidadian woman who is returning to the Caribbean to participate in the revolution in Grenada. The sketches reveal the sexual exploits, failed relationships, political affiliations, racial discrimination, and gender expectations of the different characters. Although each character has a unique identity and past, there are commonalities that unite them. All have been altered by their Canadian lives, creating a community of belonging. This sense of community, however, is limited to the temporary, transitory space of the mid-air flight of a plane, limited to their presence and participation in the movement between places. In this in-between space, they are joined by their travel, by their common experiences in Canada, and by their longing for home.

The sketches reveal the play between Canadian and Caribbean identities through the selective performance and denial of the self. The spatial trajectory of the journey is

mirrored by the shift in identity of each subject, and both the starting point and the ending point are articulated through conscious performance. As the subjects straddle these two identities, they enact specific roles. In Canada, as they wait in line with their baggage, they are reserved:

[t]hey hesitated before smiling with each other. They had learned hesitancy here. They had learned caution. It wasn't proper to yell each other's names across the street here. It wasn't right to blare music out windows for neighbors to hear.... Here, all that was courtesy became insult; all that was human turned to signs of backwardness (*Sans Souci* 133).

Life in Canada has trained these subjects to resist interaction and to withhold sentiment. Excited as they are to return, the subjects are aware that "it would be embarrassing to let go in the airport" and express their elation (134). Beneath this restraint, there is an excitement to leave their "tight and deceptive" lives and return to an open, friendly place, a place where people "settle into gregariousness and frown on reserve" (134).

Expressing the cultural differences between Canada and the Caribbean, the subjects anticipate their own transformations. The social freedom associated with home allows these exiled subjects to foresee a shift in their own behaviour. The physical journey is indicative of this expected metamorphosis, and the act of travel demonstrates the change. The flight's movement through space alters the expression of the self: the closer the plane gets to the Caribbean, and the further it moves from Canada, the freer and more expressive the group becomes. As the journey progresses, "the blasts of calypso coming from somebody's ghetto blaster" grow louder, and the "honeyed, high,

singing-talk of Trinidadian women spread[s] through the huge cabin” (*Sans Souci* 138-139). The flight enables the travellers to become “more and more uninhibited, the music louder, the laughter more infectious and elongated” (141); moving through the space between Canada and the Caribbean, “Canadian anonymity [gives] way to Trinidadian familiarity” (141). Retrieving their dormant Caribbean identities, the passengers steadily transform.

Although the identities of each passenger are altered, there is an element of performance in their enthusiasm. Voiced by an omniscient narrator, Ayo speculates that beneath their laughing and singing, the passengers are not prepared for the Carnival that awaits them: they are “too old, not from age, but from living in another way” and “too tired to last the four days of drinking, fucking, dancing and not sleeping that Carnival required” (139). Through Ayo, Brand explores the mythologization of home, a place that lives in the minds of the passengers in “exaggerated phrases” of nostalgia (139). Just as Ayo suggests they are deceiving themselves, the passengers admit to performing upon their return. The conditions of their journey are staged, ensuring that each subject presents the intended image. The omniscient narrator explains that all of the characters examine themselves, asking, “Did they look good enough to have lived [away], did they look good enough to return and not have someone notice that life [in Canada] wasn’t all that rosy. Did they look good enough to inspire envy” (134). Implicit in their self-evaluations is the desire to save face. The hardships of immigration are downplayed to project an enviable subject. While “[t]he majority of those who had gone away worked hard all their lives” without significant changes to status or wealth, they actively encourage and perpetuate the myth that life away is one of ease and riches (134). With

suitcases stuffed full of material wealth as proof of their prosperous new lives, the immigrant subjects return ‘back home,’ a site that exists as both a place and a space. Others, who do not return to visit, further “[enrich] the myth of easiness and prosperity” with their “messages in letters and parcels and money” (135). The performance extends beyond physical appearances and material goods; the returning subjects rehearse statements that will differentiate them from those who never left. They make comparisons between their two homes, always presenting the Canadian experience in a positive light, and comments about Canada are indirect affronts to the Caribbean, designed to express the sophistication and the new lifestyle of the speaker. Moreover, the characters must hide their true financial situations: Jasmine, for instance, uses the discomfort caused by the heat as an excuse “for running out of time and money at the end of two weeks” (132). The return to Trinidad presents an escape from the realities of life in Canada, from the hard work, racism, and sexism these subjects face every day. Even if they may face these same realities in the Caribbean, the imagined space of home can serve as a retreat from the place of Canada; in nostalgic rememberings and imagined returns, the Caribbean home exists as a space of potentiality. After performing for two weeks, Jasmine will return “to Toronto, to starvation for the next six months and her back bending over a mop,” and she will start to save for her next trip ‘back home’ (132). Like most of the other subjects, Jasmine will relish in her character while she is in Trinidad.

Performing the role of the successful Canadian is a fulfilment of the cultural belief that leaving can “change your class and station” (134). The dissenting Ayo explains that Trinidadians are taught to have desire for elsewhere, if not for themselves, then for their families. She sees that the performances are rooted in a culture in which

“[i]t [is] everyone’s dream to leave” (134). In perpetuating these myths, Trinidad’s children are “grown for export, like sugar cane and arrowroot, to go away, to have distaste for staying” (134). Anyone who tries to dispel the belief of unanimously prosperous lives in Canada is met with disbelief and anger. This point of contention bespeaks the culture’s need to force its gaze elsewhere, if only to avoid what exists in this place. Although Ayo provides no reason for the desire to leave, the colonial history of this place serves as a potential motive; imagining life in another place enables subjects to find new spaces that do not reflect the realities of the places they inhabit. In believing there is something else, something better, people have hope for themselves and their futures. Enemies are made when one tries to explain the harsh reality of life in Canada, and “[p]eople [at] home would look rather nastily and accuse [anyone trying to do so] of liking good things for [themselves] and not for others” (135). Relating the unpleasant experiences of Canada makes the speaker selfish and conniving in the eyes of others. The imagined space of Canada, of an accessible land of opportunity, keeps those in Trinidad hopeful. The performances, therefore, are as much to preserve hope as they are to preserve reputations. The immigrant subjects project happy and prosperous lifestyles to maintain the aspirations of those back home. Even in national expectations, there is a play between home and away. The spatial movement between Canada and the Caribbean expresses these personal and collective pasts of emigration, and in travelling back to the Caribbean, these subjects consider, voluntarily and involuntarily, their liminal positions.

As the telos of the story is Trinidad, “Sketches in Transit...Going Home” draws attention to the Caribbean cultural identity, specifically the Caribbean projections of sexuality and ethnicity. The two male characters, Iron and Tony, exhibit social

behaviours that express the conditions of the Caribbean. In depicting Iron's overt sexuality through hyper-masculine gestures, Brand is simultaneously furthering a cultural stereotype and exposing a social reality. His self-proclaimed virility and his tales of promiscuity denote a society in which a traditional masculinity is valued. Focusing on sexual conquests and hinting at a dangerous past, Brand sketches Iron as a forward, aggressive male. There is a violence to his character, one that simultaneously indicates his strength and his weakness. His endless bragging draws the attention of the other characters and the readers to his own insecurities and begs the reader to consider the social climate in which his magnified sense of masculinity was cultivated. What kind of cultural environment creates such aggressive behaviour? Perhaps more than his words, his physical presence makes a statement. His grotesque gestures stand as both a reaffirmation for himself and a demonstration of his manhood to others. In grabbing his genitals, "he patted [them] and stroked [them], made sure that [they were] still there by feeling for [them] every five minutes. He introduced [them] to women with a movement of his hand lifting [them] and smiling" (138). In touching himself repeatedly, Iron is asserting his masculinity to himself and to those around him. Brand's characterization of Iron is mirrored by her depiction of Caribbean males in other stories. Prime and Uncle Ranni in the title story "Sans Souci" also reinforce the notion that sexual and dangerous attributes make a man. "Sans Souci" narrates the quotidian of Claudine, a mother of three children, but it emphasizes masculinity as a destructive force. The father of her children, Prime, is violent and tough, and the community respects his "two cheloidal scars" because they "meant that he was afraid of nothing" (3). She bears his children after he rapes her at the age of thirteen, and his aggressive sexuality gives him authority.

Similarly, Ranni, Claudine's uncle, is known for his murderous tales and threats of violence. She goes to him to seek vengeance, but becomes frightened by his promise of violence. Prime is known and revered as a man for his lack of fear, while Uncle Ranni is known for his murderous tales and threats of violence. Both, through implied or explicit violence, enact machismo. But as Judith Butler points out, "[p]erformativity is...not a singular act, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms" (*Bodies* 12). Conditioned by a society in which men are valued through traditional gender roles, a society in which men are encouraged to exert their masculinity through promiscuity and violence, these characters reflect, and in fact embody, the role of a stereotypical man. Just as the passengers enact roles to fulfil their own and others' expectations, Iron's expression of manhood is a performance of gender.

Ethnicity is similarly expressed, although to a lesser degree, to expose the cultural division that exists among Blacks in the Caribbean. The discussion of racial divisions is contextualized by Ayo's consideration of social interactions between whites and Blacks. She watches as another passenger attempts to eat 'white' plane food and sees the quiche as an affront, as a means to "remind [Blacks] that [they] didn't know anything" (135). Ayo speculates that this is a way for white people to remind Black people of the social hierarchy, to maintain superiority over them. Using this hierarchy as context, Brand broaches the subject of skin colour, emphasizing the division between light-skinned and dark-skinned Blacks through the characterization of Tony. Rather than focussing on inter-race relations, Brand addresses the internal hierarchy among Caribbean Blacks. Referred to as "colourism" by George Elliot Clarke, this division separates racialized subjects according to skin pigment (280). As a light-skinned Black, Tony's identity is

represented through both his own and his mother's reflections on skin colour. His mother is proud that he is light-skinned, and she hopes that he will marry either a white woman or a French Creole woman in Trinidad to maintain the family's colour (*Sans Souci* 137). Tony himself agrees with "an article on the 'inferiority of Blacks'" because he is convinced that "[i]t didn't mean Blacks like him" (137). He concludes that the article refers to "those 'nigger people'," a statement that expresses internalized racism and hints at self-hatred (137). In using the term 'nigger' to address those 'inferior Blacks,' Tony is reinforcing a legacy of discrimination and hatred directed at all Blacks. While the term has recently been reappropriated by some cultural circles³, Tony's articulation is designed to denigrate its subject. Although he is using the term to address a specific segment of the Black population, the word 'nigger' admits and connotes a general hatred for all Blacks. Through this expression, Tony reveals Caribbean social organization; in Trinidad, as in most "black-majority countries," George Elliot Clarke writes, "social divisions occur around class and less so around race"(280). For those of a lower class, Canada presents means to change rank: getting a Canadian education, for example, can cause the subject to be "elevated to brown skin status" (*Sans Souci* 134). Through this desire for social status, the relation between class and ethnicity is exposed.

Ethnicity and sexuality function in this short story to present a sketch of Trinidadian cultural expectations. The characters enact traditional gender roles and perform embedded racial hierarchies, reflecting the realities of their place of origin.

³Recently, the term nigger has been reappropriated by some Blacks as a form of empowerment. Many Blacks have adopted this loaded word, and new uses include the modified version 'nigga' to connote brother or friend. Offering a reason for the use of this offensive term, Rinaldo Walcott suggests that the "remaking of language [and its meanings] is the way to come to terms with the past in the present" (48-49).

Exploring the complex and diverse markers of identity, Brand hints at a personal and collective history specific to location. Despite physical movements, the Caribbean pasts of each passenger are present. Their lives in Canada reflect more than just their Caribbean roots: the collective history of slavery is inescapable for all Black subjects, even in a story that does not explicitly deal with it. In exasperation, Ayo considers the naivety of her fellow passengers: she finds their performances transparent, specifically their enactments of successful Canadians, condemning them for acting “as if the whole damn world wasn’t built on slavery” (140). The past, recent or ancestral, is inescapable, even if one pretends otherwise.

III. “I don’t know where I’m from”⁴

The Caribbean presents a viscerally experienced place for the immigrant or exiled subject. Africa, however, remains an intangible, uncertain space. Subjects identify with a collective past, one that includes the slave trade, but there is no certainty in this branch of history aside from the knowledge that it occurred. Africa is present within the identity of Brand’s Black subjects, appearing through the internalized considerations of the collective history of slavery and through the externalized recognition of African roots. This presence, however, is elusive: exact histories, locations, peoples, and dates elude the subject, and this past can never be fully recovered. African roots exist for the Black subject as memories to an amnesia patient: there is a desire to remember, to know, and to discover, yet an inability to place the familiarity, to distinguish the truth, and to conjure the past.

⁴ Dionne Brand. A Map to the Door of No Return. (Toronto: Vintage, 2001) 177.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand openly discusses the personal sentiments of loss and curiosity that surround an unknown and painful collective African past. A meditation on Black existence, this text searches for truths that will enable the belonging of the Black subject. The Door of No Return unites Blacks everywhere, serving as a metaphor for place or, more specifically, for many places that have been lost or unidentified in collective memory and history (*A Map* 18). The Door is the threshold, simultaneously uniting and separating the known and the unknown. This metaphor for the “fissure between the past and the present” is the place where “ancestors departed one world for another,” where “names were forgotten and all beginnings recast” (5). The collective identity of Blacks is lodged in this metaphoric space, on the frontier of past and present, known and unknown. The subject’s relationship with the Door is complex, for “[t]o have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction” (18). Although all belonging is metaphoric, Brand sees this dynamic as particularly unstable because both belonging and history are at stake. Living as fiction gives Brand great creative liberties: as an artist she is free to employ various genres, and as a subject, who is at once real and fictional, she is allowed to navigate collective and individual imaginations. She is forced to use metaphor, not only for self-expression but also for investigation. Her subject, the Door of No Return, is a metaphor, a fictional place, and a historical space, and her text is a metaphorical map to finding this elusive, imagined locale. In “relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including [herself], [Brand is] constructing a map of the region, paying attention to faces, to the unknowable, to

unintended acts of returning, to impressions of doorways” (19). This pastiche of memory, imagination, fact, and narrative coalesces to form a text of identity.

Much like the Caribbean’s presence-in-absence, so too Africa serves as an unconscious consciousness, as something that is always there but never within reach. With limited personal accounts of the slave trade, Africa is “a place strictly of the imagination – what is imagined therefore is a gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of a place” (*A Map* 25). Moreover, what is imagined is felt. Africa is not simply an imagined space; it is experienced and lived every day. Because Africa remains elusive, Brand uses remnants of an African past to consider this collective history. *Sans Souci and Other Stories* explores the subject’s relationship to Africa through the psychological and physical remnants of slavery. Always united, slavery and Africa coexist in the minds of Black subjects. For the black Caribbean-Canadian subject specifically, slavery functions in the stories “St. Mary’s Estate” and “At the Lisbon Plate” as a means to explore collective history and to express a longing for an African identity. *A Map to the Door of No Return* serves as a guide for investigating the unfinished thoughts surrounding a location that is at once a concrete place and an imagined space.

The story “St. Mary’s Estate” incorporates the speaker’s personal past with the collective history of slavery. It tells of a subject returning to the place of her birth, a place that evokes consideration of more than just childhood, and details the sentiments that arise when this character encounters the landscape of her childhood, a man who effectively stole her grandfather’s job, and a history of slavery. Additionally, in this revisiting of her past, the protagonist considers the authenticity of history and historical data. Returning for the purpose of seeing an old haunt, the speaker and her companions

are met with a place that elicits the consideration of a communal past. In the same way that she regarded the dried out riverbed by the entrance to the estate with “a mixture of fear and curiosity” (*Sans Souci* 43), the speaker greets her past “feeling comfortable and awestruck at once” (45). She is amazed by how things have remained the same and shocked by elements she has remembered incorrectly. Memories are exposed as both truth and myth. On the one hand, the speaker is only concerned with what her memory tells her. She does not need “to write down the correct spelling of the name of the road” because the riverbed, the duennes that inhabit them, and her ‘incorrect’ spelling of the road have all “been preserved in [her] head” (43). Historical accuracy is not as important as her interpretation, for it is her memory that stands as reality. Nothing she has experienced will change her memory of the landscape: “[n]ot emigration, not schooling, not brightly lit cities” have altered her imaginings of this place, and the character realizes that her interpretation of her personal history is just as important as the actuality of the place (43-44).

Mixing myth with history, the subject navigates her memory to recollect the past. As they enter the estate, the memories and remnants of her past interact with the greater collective history of slavery. The return to this piece of land is not simply a reconsideration of her personal experience: in looking at the barracks, the tamarind tree, and the ocean, the speaker imagines a past beyond her own. The exploration of her personal history is mirrored by the contemplation of the collective history of slavery. Looking at the sea, she thinks it is “[t]he kind of sea to raise your eyes from labour to. This must have been the look toward the sea that slaves saw as they pulled oxen, cut and shelled coconut, [and] dug provisions from the black soil.... This must have been a look

of envy” (45). In the act of gazing, the speaker contemplates the lives of slaves who were once in the very same spot. In meeting a figure from her past, the man who took her grandfather’s job, the speaker feels “an emotion like resentfulness” rising within; she considers how “something learned [and felt] so long ago can still call upon the same emotion and have it come, fresh and sharp” (46). Just as the sight of this man evokes feelings of resentment, the beach and the house that is perched on it present the speaker with negative emotions. The house, belonging to the white proprietors, reminds her of her personal past of racial segregation and the collective history of slavery. “Reaching back into [her memory], thirty-four years, a command, visceral, fresh as the first day it was given,” stops her from moving towards the owner’s house (49). Her mama’s words – “It is their place and we are ‘niggers’” – still, to this day, affect her (49). In a trance-like state, the subject looks around the property, repeating each part of the landscape:

This is where I was born. This is the white people’s house. This is the overseer’s shack. Those are the estate worker’s barracks. This is where I was born. That is the white people’s house this is the overseer’s shack those are the slave barracks. That is the slave owner’s house this is the overseer’s shack those are the slave barracks (49).

As the chant progresses, the present is undone, and the history of slavery is invoked. Not only does her repetition evolve to expose a history of slavery but in positioning the present with the past, the speaker also aligns the two, suggesting that the past is always part of the present. Noting her mama’s words, she reflects that the verbal warning “still had the power of starvation, whip and...blood” (49). Even though slavery is in the past, the articulation of this collective suffering is still powerful enough to affect the present.

The subject is not free from slavery because it is a part of Black history. Thinking of past conditions, she unites her own particular experience with collective sentiment: “To sleep beneath the raw stench of copra, night after night, for two hundred years is not easy; to hear tired breathing, breathless fucking, children screaming, for five hundred years is not easy” (50). This five hundred year history is indicative of a communal past and a collective suffering. Through recognition of the atrocious conditions, the demeaning labour, and the disgusting discrimination and violence of slavery, the speaker acknowledges that “[t]his is how [she] knows struggle” (50). She rediscovers the greater suffering through the investigation of her own history. Aware of the legacy of pain, she is certain that she knows it so well “[a]n artist could not have drawn it better” (50). She leaves this property, a “vigilant reminder and a current record of ownership,” knowing that this suffering will be there forever (44).

While the protagonist in “St. Mary’s Estate” summons a collective past of slavery through the reinterpretation of her own history, the main character in “At the Lisbon Plate” considers those around her to avenge the five hundred year history of exploitation. The subject of this story sees herself as “a woman in enemy territory,” and throughout the story she assesses the ‘enemies’ who surround her (97). Focalized by a drunken narrator, the narrative of “At the Lisbon Plate” shifts from topic to topic, relating stories of her childhood, her friendships, the history of oppression, racial divisions, and of violent revenge. All of these events occur within the narrative of the unnamed speaker, limiting the relation of these multiple histories to her perspective. As she sits in the restaurant, The Lisbon Plate, she is “searching and uneasy, haunted like a plantation house,” and her present is infused with a constant reflection of the past (97). She acknowledges that her

“present existence is mere chance, luck, syzygy,” and she is aware that “a little more than a century ago [she] may have been [the restaurateur’s] slave” (97). In her contemplation of present and past, various characters express complex relationships with the history the speaker is attempting to relate. Through the Black female characters of Elaine and the protagonist’s aunt, the characterization of the threatening bar patrons, and the influence of a mysterious old woman, the speaker explores a history that bridges time and place.

Brand creates two characters to foil each other in their articulation of the Black female body. The speaker’s friend and aunt contradict each other in their approach to presenting their racialized and gendered identities, but despite their differing approaches, both are deemed incomplete by the speaker for their shared denial of history. In their polarized responses to their selves, both repress present and past realities. The speaker’s friend, Elaine, is in search of her African roots. She is “looking for a rich African to help her make her triumphant return to the motherland,” but the speaker hints that there is more to her identification with Africa (103). Although Elaine exhibits the dress and language of Africa, the speaker suggests that Elaine’s desire “to be a queen in ancient Mali or Songhai” is but a defence mechanism (99). The protagonist dismisses Elaine’s interest in Africa as a “nationalist phase,” where “[e]verything was culture, rootsy” (104). Suggesting that her companion’s nationalist sentiments are temporary, the speaker undermines Elaine’s emotional and psychological attachment to Africa. Ultimately, she suggests that Elaine focuses on the ‘motherland’ because “she is always getting away from something or someone” (98). In other words, Elaine’s African identification is a form of escapism, a way to distance herself from her present conditions. Moreover, in aspiring to be an African queen, Elaine ignores the collective history of slavery that

carried her ancestors away from the motherland. The expression of Elaine's nationalist tendencies is a way to erase the collective traumas of slavery and present-day racism.

While Elaine embraces the Black body as a means of escapism, the protagonist's aunt exhibits a denial of the self to cope with her Black identity. As a young woman, the aunt would slick her hair "back to bring out the Spanish and hide the African" (100). The protagonist describes how the aunt would "grab [the children] and scrub [them], as if to take the black out of [their] skins" and how she was never satisfied by their appearances, "blackness intent on [their] skins" (100). The speaker describes the aunt's fascination with aesthetics through her description of the care of personal appearances and of the garden her aunt maintained. The projection of aesthetics through the garden and the body, both her own and her nieces', bespeaks the aunt's emphasis on image. We are told that she goes mad, and the speaker blames years of self-denial as the cause (100). The madness, however, is liberating: the protagonist notes that her aunt's madness has "made her quite sane" in that "she no longer uses face powder" and her garden has become a desert (110). With her descent into madness, the aunt abandons her image-conscious aesthetic, the aesthetic that ultimately denied her own blackness, and she embraces her natural self. Whether she looks to Elaine, who runs from her present through the projection of an ancestral past, or to her aunt, who denied her blackness for most of her life, the main character interacts with Black female subjects who avoid history. Moreover, these characters do not allow the self to be fully expressed. The denial of history is, in effect, a denial of the self.

The narrator is further surrounded by the patrons of The Lisbon Plate. Although the patrons come from various backgrounds, the speaker unites them through a racial

binary. For the speaker, one is either Black or not-Black. In all those who are not, the speaker sees “the expatriates from the colonial wars, the money changers and the skin dealers, the whip handlers, the coffle makers and the boatswains,” all those who aided and abetted slavery (105). Long after slavery, she continues to locate the various patrons as active participants in this specific historical oppression. She looks at the patrons and remembers that “[t]he last time [she] saw them, [she] was lying in the hold of a great ship leaving Conarky for the new world” (107). Spanning temporal and physical boundaries, she experiences the movement through the Door of No Return and invokes the image of being taken from Africa. Furthermore, she implicates those around her in the slave trade. Looking at a patron and the owner, she imagines her role in their relationship: in asking, “What would a punk klu klux klansman and a washed-up ex-colonial siren have in common,” the speaker considers herself as a uniting force (108). Her presence connects them, as historically they have both been her oppressors. Her imaginings, which situate past historical oppressions in the present, are furthered by the statue of Columbus that is erected across from the restaurant. Standing as a symbol for oppression, the representation of Columbus is an invocation of the injustices of the past. Knowing that “the money that financed Columbus’s voyage to the Americas...came from... waging a ‘just and holy war’ against the Moorish kingdom of Grenada and Islam as a whole” and that his subsequent ‘discovery’ of the Americas instigated the slave trade, the speaker cannot see the statue as innocent (*A Map* 84). Associating the patrons with the icon of Columbus, the speaker further situates the present in the past. Temporally, there is no linearity to the speaker’s conception of history; all that is past is present, and all that is present is past.

The malleability of time and space is introduced to the protagonist by a mysterious woman. This old woman captivates the speaker with her mystical powers, her knowing and experienced face, and her need for vengeance. Her magical, non-traditional abilities counter Western scientific thought and position her in opposition to European standards of knowledge and reason. She possesses truth and informs the speaker of history, the history that Elaine and the speaker's aunt have been trying to forget and deny. Through the juju and bones, visions and tablets, jokes and horror stories, the old woman exposes Black history to the narrator. The overwhelming presence of oppressors is countered by the speaker's spiritual guide, and it is with their interaction that the speaker is changed. There is no escaping history, and with this knowledge, she faces the world, unable to distinguish between the present and the past. Interaction with this old woman enables the speaker to find truth in history; she realizes "that death, its frequency, causes, sequence and application to written history, favours, even anticipates certain latitudes. The number of mourners, their enthusiasms, their entertainments, their widows' weeds, all mapped by a cartographer well-schooled in pre-Galileo geography" (106). History is written by someone, someone with interests, political attachments, nationalist identifications, gender assumptions, and racial ties. What people learn is dependent on the position of the historian, and the narrator is frustrated by the histories that exist. The speaker re-writes the shooting scene of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* to provide an example of misrepresented history. Retelling the scene from Ahmed's perspective, Merseault is presented as a violent racist, one who intentionally kills the Arab. In this version, there is no sunstroke to confuse Merseault and no context to account for his emotional detachment; rather, the speaker's retelling focuses on the common occurrence

of a European killing an Arab. These observations are only possible after being exposed to the soucouyant-like woman. The old woman is present in the story, at least in the mind of the speaker, but the actuality of her existence is undetermined. Acting in mysterious ways and being accounted for by an intoxicated narrator, the woman's presence is concurrently accepted and doubted. On the one hand, she is seen as a determining factor in the narrator's behaviour; on the other, her magical powers make her fantastical. Even if the speaker is delusional, "[a]nyone with a vision [is] helpful in bad times" (109). Because the speaker's present is determined by history, she is focused on attributing traumas of the past to people of today. In doing so, she illuminates the presence of a particularly traumatizing history in the Black subject and signals the political nature of history.

Geographically, the considerations of an African past and a history of slavery in *Sans Souci and Other Stories* take place in other locations. In "St. Mary's Estate," the narrator considers the collective history of slavery through a return to her Caribbean place of birth. Lodged in a context of colonialism and slavery, Africa exists through association. Similarly, the speaker in "At the Lisbon Plate" considers an African past and seeks revenge for slavery in a Toronto bar. From her position in Canada and in time, she aspires to avenge another place/space (Africa) and another historical experience (slavery). These meditations on Africa, which obviously take place elsewhere, indicate its elusiveness. Africa exists as "a spiritual location" and "a psychic destination" for Brand's Black subjects, but it remains intangible and unknowable. The Door of No Return – the metaphoric break in place and consciousness – is irretrievable. Because it is abstract, "no real place can actualize the lost place" (*A Map* 26). The loss is

simultaneously physical and psychic, experienced through various locations and sentiments.

IV. “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being”⁵

Central to the works of Dionne Brand is a feeling of loss. At the heart of the Black subject, there is a void, one that cannot be filled by love or money, by success or acceptance. This emptiness derives from a missing or unsettled past, from a present that is not complete, and a future that cannot be fulfilled. Subjects travel the globe, either looking for the answers or trying to escape them, and this spatial investigation is at the root of Brand’s historical project. Brand is navigating the varied locations and histories of Canada, the Caribbean, and Africa in her subjects’ search for identity. Brand also explores the manners in which history is investigated. Personal narratives are autonomous, and Brand understands that “[r]emembering is the active process of making present the gaps and silences in official histories” (Walcott 68). Furthermore, historical truth is undermined while untraditional methods of knowledge, such as visions and jazz, are given agency. Brand pays particular attention to women’s narratives because their “histor[ies] and memor[ies] have to be reclaimed” as a means of “reappropriating the past so as to transform [women’s] understanding of [themselves]” (Lionnet 5). These retellings of history present “a history [that] was never taught” (*A Map* 186); they voice alternative perspectives of the past. *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, *No Burden to Carry*, *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, and *A Map to the Door of No Return* present varied investigations of history to challenge the concept of one unified truth, and each considers history a mix of experience, storytelling, memory, and interpretation. Language is central

⁵ Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return*. (Toronto: Vintage, 2001) 5

to all of the articulations and explorations of history. Aware of the ideological and political nature of language, Brand plays with the possibilities and impossibilities of expression. The next chapter will explore the linguistic interactions of space, place, and identity.

**The Politics of Language: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Resistance in *Bread Out of Stone*
and *In Another Place, Not Here***

French Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure explains that language is a social construct, “a contract signed by the members of a community,” and that as such, it must be learned (14). In employing the “social institution” of language, individuals express meanings, both intended and unintended, to their audiences (15). Drawing on Saussure and looking to language for the consciousness of the individual, Emile Benveniste suggests that “[i]t is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*” (224, his emphasis). The utterance ‘I’ is more than a pronoun: it further states the existence of a being. Language, moreover, is one of the chief means by and through which ideology, as Althusser contends, interpellates subjects. Thus, identity is both articulated and constructed through language systems: languages serve to express a sense of self, but they do so through a given culture’s matrix of signification. In this process of expression and interpretation, for example, elements such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and idiomatic expressions can identify a subject in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and region. Contending that ideology enables subjectivity, Louis Althusser states that “[t]here are no subjects except by and for their subjection” (56). He suggests that it is in ideology that the individual can “contemplate its own image” and gain subjectivity (54). Althusser further claims that “ideology has *always-already* interpellated individuals as subjects,” suggesting that “individuals are *always-already* subjects,” even before they recognize themselves as such (49-50, his emphasis); there is no subject who is outside of ideology. In the present chapter, I draw on these

theorizations of language, ideology, and subjectivity in my analysis of language and its relation to identity, place and space in Dionne Brand's prose.

Because language is a social construct, an entity that must be learned, each subject engages with it differently. By extension, there is always a space between intended and interpreted meanings. Using the example of revolutions, Brand expresses how language cannot fully account for this socio-political experience: "Revolutions are not as simple as the words given to them after they fail or triumph. Those words do not account for the sense in the body of clarity or the sharpness in the brain, and they cannot interpret the utter vindication for people like me needing revolution to reconcile being in a place" (*Bread* 54). Finding the right words to express a particular sentiment or concept is difficult. Brand argues that sometimes an exact term, an appropriate way to express multiple and complex meanings and relationships, is elusive. The short story "Photograph" conveys the problem of expression through the depiction of the predicament of a daughter with an absentee mother:

We had debated what to call my mother over and over again and come to no conclusions. Some of the words sounded insincere and disloyal, since they really belonged to my grandmother... when we tried them out for my mother, they hung so cold in the throat that we were discouraged immediately. ...Unable to come to a decision... we never called my mother by any name. If we needed to address her we stood about until she noticed that we were there and then we spoke (*Sans Souci* 74).

The speaker remembers the difficulty of finding a term that is suitable, respectful, and intimate enough to express the mother-child relationship but distanced enough to account

for the reality of their interaction. As language fails to provide a term to incorporate and express the complex relationship between this particular mother and her children, the protagonist and her siblings avoid addressing their mother altogether. Negotiating the limitations of language, this character comes up with strategies to circumvent these deficiencies. Part of the problem is the narrator's acute awareness of language and its resonance. Concerned with expressing herself accurately, the protagonist constructs meaning through absence: in not giving her mother a title, she avoids mixed meanings and misunderstandings, but perhaps she forgets that meaning is similarly constructed out of what is not said, out of the silences and unspoken sentiments behind and between words.

As each individual actively participates in the construction of meaning, language becomes a shaper and a vehicle of personal and collective ideologies. Aside from the denotative and connotative dimensions of words, formal properties such as dialects, idiomatic expressions, and double meanings are codified within any given language, establishing a matrix of signs by which speakers comprehend the words of others and express themselves. The multiplicity of meanings, the range of expressions, and the recognizably large vocabulary of the English language enable speakers to express themselves in nuanced ways. However, these same elements of language also serve to exclude people based on their abilities to read the signs. The contradictory nature of language is of interest to Dionne Brand, and she explores the ability of the English language to restrain and empower, to confuse and clarify, and to alienate and unify its speakers. Further, post-colonial theorists note that language "becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated," and, correspondingly, it

has become a site of resistance and reinvention (Ascroft et al 7). In the two texts discussed in this chapter, the breaking of silence in the face of adversity, the symbolic renaming of people, places, and objects, and the renunciation of ‘Standard’ grammars act as examples of how marginalized peoples have used, and are using, language as a vehicle for opposition. Dionne Brand’s prose addresses the inclusive and exclusive elements of the English language, exploring speech and writing from exiled, Black, Caribbean-Canadian, and feminist perspectives and presenting the reader with forms of resistance to the ideological systems within the English language. Exploring the exclusive and inclusive nature of language and examining the subject’s agency through spoken and written word, Brand’s novel *In Another Place, Not Here* and her collection of essays *Bread Out of Stone* exemplify her engagement with language as a site of identity formation. Rather than using the essays to theorize the novel, I will examine the two works as separate entities. In exploring the texts side by side and drawing on examples from both, rather than reading one through the other, I want to demonstrate how Brand articulates similar concerns regarding language, identity, place, and space in these different genres.

Focusing on *In Another Place, Not Here* and *Bread Out of Stone*, the three sections of the present chapter will address forms of exclusion, inclusion, and resistance that are particular to the function of language in the creation of places and the imagining of spaces.

I start with a brief overview of the two primary works. *Bread Out of Stone* is a heterogeneous collection of essays on topics that include race/racism, sexuality, the body, politics, history, and language. The essays are autobiographical in their style, but they

work from Brand's personal experience to explore greater social concerns. Navigating the physical and psychic dimensions of places in Canada, Trinidad, and Grenada, the essays express specific places and imaginatively shuttle both subjects and readers to and from various locations. These multiple places are also present in Brand's first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*. Taking place in two locations, an unnamed Caribbean island and the city of Toronto, the novel follows the intersecting lives of two characters, Elizete and Verlia. Each protagonist focalizes a section of the novel as they experience life on this island and in this city. Elizete is a disenfranchised cane worker, who is marginalized by her class, race, and gender. When she meets and falls in love with Verlia, a union organizer, Elizete joins the revolution, and they become lovers. Verlia is Caribbean-born, leaving this island for Canada at the age of seventeen. With her arrival in Toronto, she participates in the Black movement, but she returns to the island as an adult to join another cause: the unionization of the sugarcane workers. Dying in the revolution, Verlia abandons her lover, and Elizete, in her grief, ventures to Toronto, hoping to find the other place her lover inhabited. In their movements between these two locations, both Verlia and Elizete resist imposed language structures to articulate their identities. At other times, the protagonists experience belonging through the utterance of shared experiences. Nonetheless, they are faced with the exclusivity of language, as their specific identities are denied agency.

I. "a vehicle of erasure, violence, and separation"⁶

Subjects in Dionne Brand's works experience the different ways in which the exclusionary power of language can manifest itself. Ethnicity, gender, and class are

⁶ Kevin Everod Quashie. Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)becoming the Subject. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004). 132.

expressed through speech and written language, and these identity markers allow others to discriminate and alienate subjects. Furthermore, characters experience the exclusion of language through deliberate silencing and through loss of meaning. Brand uses language to demonstrate that for the Black, poor woman, no place is unaffected by language. W. H. New reminds us that place is formed through language systems because “[p]eople read place in words, and they read place *as* words” (165). Places require language for the articulation of their characteristics, but because the Black subject has learned English through a history of subjugation, this language can also function as an excluding factor. Inherent to any articulation is an inescapable history of slavery and colonization, and speech in this “tongue of conquest, [this] language of defeat” is always already encoded with meaning beyond the standard ideological systems (*Land to Light On* 95). *In Another Place, Not Here* explores the implications of being denied agency, of exclusion based on identity markers, and these exclusions are situated in specific places. Words stand to articulate the self through beliefs, nationalities, sexualities, histories, and classes, but these words that vocalize identity “take the terms of [the black female’s] assertion from a discourse determined by an Other” (Gates, Jr. 7). Speaking in a “Western language in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, of negation,” Black subjects have difficulty in presenting the self (7). Accepting or denying the subtexts of language, subjects judge each other and recognize the difficulty of language when read through the racial and gendered expectations of a place. Elizete, for example, sees the futility of speaking out. She sees Verlia “talking like she know what she is saying” and notices that the cane workers are listening to this strange woman speak about the revolution (*In Another Place* 13). Within this observation, Elizete immediately

undermines Verlia's authority; without listening to Verlia's speech, she assumes this woman is without knowledge. Elizete "walk[s] past because [she has] no time for no woman talking" (13); she has no time for someone without agency. In her world, or more specifically in this place, women are without power, and their words "don't mean nothing" (13). Because "[i]t don't matter what woman say in the world," Elizete ignores Verlia's attempts to give voice to those who have been silenced (13). Moreover, in ignoring another female, Elizete is enacting the discrimination of her oppressors; in denying Verlia, Elizete removes her own autonomy as a woman and denounces her own Black female body. Men "have always occupied the dominant position in [capitalist] culture" (Reiche 53), and Elizete's articulation reinforces this hierarchy. Her words also demonstrate that "[s]ex is integrated into work and public relations," and as such, the body encodes social interactions (Reiche 50). The Black female body suffers in this place because it has been delegated a secondary status. Women, here, are at the mercy of their male counterparts, and this is demonstrated by Elizete's relationship with Isaiah. He is the man "she was given to," like a possession, "[a]fter the woman [she] lived with" died (*In Another Place* 10). "[R]educed to a commodity," Elizete enacts "a false sexuality" that is determined by her status as a black woman (Reiche 25). Despite not wanting to be with Isaiah, she must have sex with him and obey his orders. Her submission to these social hierarchies is apparent in her initial treatment of Verlia.

Intimately related to gender, class functions to further isolate subjects through linguistic means. The class divisions of a place are reflected by the communication of its inhabitants. In *Bread Out of Stone*, Brand highlights the pride and shame that intermingle for those who cannot make it through the month without borrowing a cup of sugar or

putting groceries on credit. There is shame in having to ask for help, and there is pride in holding out as long as possible before doing so. In the Caribbean, where deep-rooted social hierarchies are based on class, subjects are excluded by their low status. Even though all of the inhabitants of some neighbourhoods were poor, “people made up their hierarchies of worth and there were classes within the class” (*Bread* 46). This exclusion extends beyond spatial distribution or ghettoization: even within poor areas, the poorest subjects are denied community based on their status. Brand explains that in Trinidad, “[b]eing decent and well off were one and the same, which made being poor and indecent one and the same, too” (46). Reputations are therefore linked to class. In her essay “Cuba,” being indecent is marked by “the long robust laughter of somebody trying to be so decent” that containing fear or pain is impossible (46). The loud, uncontrollable laugh is indicative of hard times and of subjects who want to maintain social standing but cannot stifle their nervous laughter. In expressing this attempted repression, subjects mark themselves as lower class, poor, and ultimately indecent. Once marked as lower class, these subjects are denied through language. Neighbours would “not talk to each other on the street just to keep a distance and to keep indecent people in their place” (47). Based on class hierarchies, these subjects are ignored and silenced.

Similar to class-based exclusions, subjects are denied agency through language based on ethnicity. In Canada specifically, Black subjects are silenced by distanced social interactions, by subtleties within language that allow for polite or unspoken racism, and sometimes by a status that silences any possibilities of dissent. One of the most painful experiences of racism in *Bread Out of Stone* occurs when Brand retells her experience of being denied a job due to the colour of her skin. Language is central to her

disappointment, as it is her Scottish sounding name that secures her the job over the telephone. Interpellating the female voice as white, specifically Scottish, the employer places his own impressions of Brand above other potential realities and offers her the job. Despite her best efforts to embody the image he so surely wanted, the employer decidedly announces the position has been filled when a Black Dionne Brand shows up for the job. The black subject is then doubly betrayed: she is rejected by an employer who is racist and denied the articulation of her identity by a name that is ambiguous. The encounter demonstrates the complex dynamic between language and subject. Language, in this case, fails to communicate at least one aspect of her identity, and while Brand talks about the repercussions of possessing such a name, she does not explain her sentiments regarding its origins. Unspoken in her narrative of racial exclusion is the history of colonization that results in this linguistic (mis)representation.

In terms of racial exclusion through language, Brand also addresses the issue of Black subjects without citizenship, immigrant, or refugee status. Illegal immigrant subjects are left without a voice, as any articulation has the potential to reveal their status. The silencing of illegal immigrants is both literal and metaphoric: Brand explores the loss of speech and the negation of human rights through subjects who cannot express themselves. In *In Another Place, Not Here*, Elizete comes to Canada without any official status. She lives in the streets, alleyways, and flop houses, and she eats leftovers straight from garbage cans to survive. Elizete hides from the police and spends her days and nights wandering the city as an outsider, and she is removed from the world that is “white and runs things” (*In Another Place* 180). Finding herself in the city Verlia deemed “as glassy as its downtown buildings and as secretive” (180), Elizete experiences language-

based exclusion. For some subjects, the city's "conversations are not understandable" (180). Elizete realizes that she is excluded from the city and sees that this place has a "way of making you speechless" (94). Demonstrating the relation of place and language, Elizete realizes that living in a city without agency or rights silences a person. This metaphoric interpretation of being marginalized translates into literal silence. The clearest example of this literal silence occurs when Elizete is raped by her white employer. She cannot report her rape at the hands of her employer because she has no status in Canada. As an illegal immigrant, and a woman at that, she is silenced by circumstance and unable to put the assault into words. Her rapist knows as much: "[h]e does not fear her, [as] he knows that she will not [and, more importantly, cannot] tell anyone" (92). In this place, where the subject exists illegally, there is no language.

Significantly, it is the search for another place that draws Elizete to Toronto. Canada has no meaning for Elizete because there are no words to define this place. Places need language to be defined, and Elizete cannot find the words to express Canada: "When she tried calling it something, the words would not come. ... She would not come to know this place no matter how much she walked it, no matter if she set herself to knowing, she could not size it up. It resisted knowing, the words would not come" to express this indefinite and unknowable location (69). There are no words to allow Elizete to understand the city of Toronto, and part of her inability to know this place stems from being a marginalized figure. In considering the undefinable aspect of the city, she asks herself, "What could she call a place that could disappear or that did not exist without the help of people?" (69-70). In doing so, Elizete acknowledges that without a community, this city is intangible. Without a network, there are no concrete feelings or

words to make its existence real. In this sense, place is dependent on words for expression and other people for authentication. The reliance on community is also significant in the creation of the self. Just as the city seems fake because to understand it would depend on a community she does not have, Elizete's personal identity is reliant on others. The self becomes unstable when it is alone, for language becomes inconsequential without others to understand it. Elizete realizes that what one says no longer matters if there is no one around to hear it. She sees that "if nobody listens and nobody has the time, [speech] flies off and your mouth stays open. You end up being a liar because what you say doesn't matter. And there's no tracing or lasting to your stories" (60). Excluded by language, this subject has no community or place.

The subjugated position of the Black, female immigrant leads to linguistic exclusion through both a loss of meaning and lack of understanding. The alienation experienced in Canada silences these subjects through a denial of the self and a community of belonging. For Verlia, life in Canada loses its meaning, as language can no longer reflect the realities of existence. The once powerful and inclusive language of the black power movement has now become "quaint speech...[that] could not express anything to be taken seriously, not anger not concern, nothing" (*In Another Place* 96). This change signifies the distinction between active and passive language and between place and space. Whereas before, Verlia felt empowered and energized by the words of the movement because they defined her place, she now realizes that language "[does] not explain [these specific identities] anymore, certainly not as they were" (96). There is a disconnect between "the time it had to be explained rather than done, [and meaning] fell away and they became mute pulling it out for translation, for curiosity" (96). Once

language becomes simply a system of symbols, rather than an expression of action, Verlia is unable to see significance. Rhetoric is empty, void of meaning, for it cannot provide anything concrete, including a place. The language she speaks is no longer straightforward; rather, Verlia sees that it is plagued by ideological systems, ulterior motives, and unclear connotations. Meaning, for a disappointed Verlia, is lost, and with this loss of meaning, her place is transformed into an unstable space. The belonging she felt in this community becomes alienation, and the associations, sentiments, and characteristics of her existence here shift with this new view of the language of her place.

Equally distressing and alienating is a lack of understanding. Subjects who do not understand or who are not understood are similarly excluded through linguistic means. Verlia, as she discovers the lack of meaning in language, is also separated by her inability to understand others. With the removal of meaning, she loses contact with words. She finds that “[s]he [cannot] understand the rhythm of the talk around her,” and this distances her from others (94). She embodies this distance, feeling as though she was “watching not living” her life (94). When she does speak, her voice “seem[s] far away and there [is] always a laugh in it as if she [is] trying to amuse someone or cajole someone into listening to her, or ring out a note, a signal that she was there” (95). The way she sounds, “wheedling, small, off-key somehow, beggarly,” is a reflection of how she is excluded. Without meaningful language, she is not understood. She does not have “a way of making herself exist,” and “[she has] become useless” (95). Through meaningless and misunderstood language, Verlia understands her own exclusion from community and searches for another place. It is her search for another place that takes her back to the Caribbean.

Both Verlia and Elizete seek out other places because their current locations have lost meaning. They are linguistically excluded because the languages of their places do not account for their beings or limit them by ideology, and they imagine other spaces where the self can be realized and articulated. As they search for places of belonging, the “longing for ‘another place’ amounts to yearning for space and its promise of freedom and transformation” (Freiwald; “Cartographies” 41). In these other places, Verlia and Elizete see spaces of potentiality, spaces where they can express themselves without ideological limitations. What they forget, however, is that “space is already another place, both because subjects carry their places within them even as they venture into new spaces, and because new spaces are ultimately places with their own confinements and freedoms” (Freiwald; “Cartographies” 41).

II. “settling into our language”⁷

Although immigrants are excluded by language in their new locations, they can also create places for themselves as they find community through language and gesture, through the symbols of their pasts and sounds of their specific identities. The inclusive nature of language unites people despite their uncertain lives, a theory that Brand employs in both her autobiographical writings and her fiction. *In Another Place, Not Here* demonstrates the unifying nature of language through Elizete. Even though she does not trust anyone in Toronto, Elizete finds it “hard to resist the sound of a phrase from home, hard to resist listening to each other suck their teeth” (*In Another Place* 79). It is through the shared articulations of home that Elizete finds belonging in her housemate, Jocelyn. Dionne Brand’s autobiographical essays further this idea, as they

⁷ Dionne Brand. Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognition, Race, Dreaming, and Politics. (Toronto: Vintage Press, 1994). 53.

suggest that language plays an integral role in articulating the experiences of nostalgia, racism, and sexism encountered by her subjects. For the exiled Caribbean, community in Canada is established through a particular turn of phrase, a specifically melodic speech pattern, or an identifiable accent. The isolation of the Canadian experience is resolved with the discovery of a community of belonging, one that may not have existed elsewhere. Brand writes that when surrounded by other exiles of diverse origins, she is not only able to identify accents, but that she has adopted some herself: "I've never been to Jamaica, but as I've learned it in Toronto it inflects my speech" (*Bread* 92). Moreover, there is a community of belonging established by recognizing origins. Not only does Brand admit to picking up a part of Jamaican identity but she also explains that she can differentiate among the accents of many specific places: "I can tell if you're from Mandeville or Kingston, and here, too, I've learned to tell if you're from Roseau or Marigot in Dominica or if your French is Haitian or St. Lucian" (92). There is recognition in the accented speech of fellow Caribbeans that connects and includes the speakers, even if they come from different places. Aside from these accents and expressions that mark the speakers as distinct in the Canadian landscape, there is also a more abstract quality to their language that reflects a shared experience. Even though "they are not all from the same island or reside in the same country of exile, [exiled Caribbean women] do speak from similar vantage points" (Chancy xix). Through these inflected speech patterns, which in other circles often cause negative gendered, classed, and racialized interpellations, these accented speakers hail each other as subjects who share a common experience: the experience of migration. Despite being from different locations, the subjects are united by the fact that they are all Black immigrants in Canada.

In this diasporic community of belonging, the speakers are free to express themselves fully, without the threat of smirks, judgments, or stares and, more importantly, without the internalized negative readings of gender, class, and ethnicity. Speakers are not inhibited by their audience, and there is the excitement of “hands flying when [they] talk, the drama in the voice leaking out” (*Bread* 91). The alienation of the Canadian experience is remedied by the freedom to express a specifically Caribbean identity within the context of this new or other place. The dialogue among friends is invigorating; “the language is a feast,” and it feeds the hunger these subjects have for a sense of belonging (91). This existence is marked by community, and because “there [is] no belonging that [is] singular” in the Caribbean, the individuals in this Canadian immigrant community rely on each other (*In Another Place* 39).

Just as Elizete found comfort in the expressions of her housemate, Verlia too finds safety through language. For Verlia, language acts as a means of expressing her identity to the world. Text captures her interest as a child, and she uses newspaper clippings to symbolize her identity. The words and faces she clips from publications are representative of “coloured people somewhere beating some colonial power down,” representative of struggle and success (*In Another Place* 161). All of her clippings act as tangible artifacts of a collective identity. In these words and pictures, Verlia sees collectivity, and the textual representations comfort Verlia, a comfort her own family cannot provide. The clippings act as identity: “[b]its of newspaper are her history, words her family” (164).

When she is older, Verlia uses language to present a strong, Black, female figure, to show that she is “[b]ig mouthed and dangerous,” fearless and independent (*In Another*

Place 157). Verlia is in Canada for the purpose of “[t]elling it like it is,” and these words, words that empower and identify her, “wash every moment of fear away” (157-158). She is defined by her participation in the Black struggle, and it is language that allows her to identify with her cause. Words like ‘Sister’ and ‘Brother’, used in the context of the Black movement, have greater meanings and implications. More than just greetings, these words stand as a way to align herself with ideology. Furthermore, explicit in these terms are familial connotations. Her fellow freedom fighters are her community; she is linked to these people and is closer to them than to her own biological family, a family she has left behind in another place. Language serves no other purpose than to express her political attachments, and she is aware that “[b]efore [these articulations of identity] there were no words” (158); no words had meaning before she used them for this cause, before she identified herself as a part of the movement. In associating herself with the movement, Verlia articulates her sense of self through politicized language. She is included in a very specific community of belonging, one that defines her identity through political means and expresses once again that the personal and the political are inseparable. Finding comfort, community, and a sense of self in the Black power movement allows Verlia to transform Toronto, which exists initially as a space of potentiality, into a place of belonging. The movement solidifies Toronto as a place by providing her with a social context, a network of like-minded people, and political purposes.

Verlia experiences an overwhelming sense of safety when she joins the movement because her self is finally being articulated. For her, comfort is found in the words of the great revolutionaries like Che Guevara, so much so she “wants to live in all the poetry

and all the songs, all the revolutionary words” because they present safety (165). In their beauty, Verlia finds a haven from all the dangers and expectations of the world. The community found in political dialogue is related to the inherent ideological implications of language. Verlia relates to others through the directed articulations of charged language, language that implies political and ideological ties, and through reading texts that express similar principles. Language, as it is already encoded by ideological structures, enables both the expression of the self and the identification with others.

Language and ideology are further united when Brand uses the metaphor of language to discuss ideology. Not only is ideology inherent to language, but language is necessary for the revelation and dissemination of ideological principles. To find herself, Verlia must learn the ‘language’ of revolution. What she finds in revolutionary ideology is a “language without hopelessness and inattention, so different from the words she’d heard all her life” (*In Another Place* 166). This ‘language’ liberates her, and it joins Verlia to others who have been enlightened in the same way. Furthermore, this ‘language’ appears to Verlia to be free of oppressive structures; it empowers its ‘speakers’ rather than limiting them. As a community, these subjects express their political standpoints in order “to feel outside of some power that holds them down” (167). For Verlia, there is comfort in ideology, just as there is comfort in language and in text.

The protagonists of *In Another Place*, *Not Here* and the subjects in *Bread Out of Stone* find and create belonging through shared articulations of specific identities. Regardless of whether these shared identities are expressed through ethnicity, migration, or political convictions, the characters and subjects enjoy inclusion through linguistic

expression. These works demonstrate that the articulation of distinct identity elements enables community and that language is central to belonging. Moreover, because places need language to be articulated, subjects rely on expression to define the places they inhabit and the spaces they seek or imagine.

III. “Heading for a revolution”⁸

Through ideological language that defines and empowers the subject and through shared articulations of identity and experience, Brand enables the possibility of an inclusive subject position. Inclusion, however, is not always found; sometimes it must be made. “[F]or those who have no place,” Michael Keith and Steve Pile note, “there must be a struggle for a place to be” (5). In this sense, language becomes a site of resistance as subjects oppose its systems to create a place of belonging for themselves. Resistance is thematically present in all of Brand’s works, as she strives to make positive changes both for her community and her own personal existence. Many of her characters are strong, and they negotiate their landscapes to act against those authorities that seek to subjugate them. The field of language is no exception; characters defend their positions by redefining the English language to reflect particular identities, political positions, and national ties. All written and spoken languages express ideologies, but “Black diasporic practices of language continually revise and reveal its constructedness, and also its importance in both domination and resistance” (Walcott 49). Diaspora writings articulate variations of the same language, and writers are aware of potential difficulties in expressing the self when faced with a language out of context. In Brand’s prose, specifically, resistance to the internal sexism, racism, and colonialism of the English

⁸ Dionne Brand. Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognition, Race, Dreaming and Politics. (Toronto: Vintage Press, 1998). 87.

language can be found in three manners: the process of speaking out; the act of renaming people and places; and the process of embracing regional and national demotics as valid and acceptable forms of English.

While language simultaneously expresses ideology and fails to be precise, it does allow for speakers to resist oppression. The process of speaking out against suffering is, in itself, a form of opposition. Inherent to mental and physical trauma are “the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it,” as subjects become dominated by their victimization (Gilmore 6). Articulation is an active form of agency, one that denies a submissive position and reclaims autonomy for the speaker. The power dynamic of a hierarchy – whether class, ethnicity, or gender-based – is dependent on limiting the agency of specific groups. Verbalizing distress, publicly or privately, requires a negotiation of language, for speech has the potential to record, alter, misrepresent, confuse, express, and complicate experience. Although no articulation can fully account for trauma, the communication of a traumatic experience can be seen as an act of defiance because vocalization is a means of refuting victimhood and reclaiming the self as an authority. Returning to Benveniste and his consideration of language and subjectivity, we see that speaking out, in any form, necessarily invokes the self. All expressions vocalize the subject, a concept that conjures considerations of the autobiographical. This genre is particularly useful in the investigation of trauma and agency, not only because Brand often writes in the autobiographical mode but also because contemporary theory explores autobiography as a means of speaking out and resisting domination. The introspective genre lends itself to the expression of suffering due to its confessional nature, and writing trauma “involves processes of acting out,

working over, and to some extent working through [the negative experiences] in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past” (LaCapra 186). Personal and collective pains are expressed through this particular form, complicating the testimonial nature of the genre. How does one account for collective experience, such as racism, slavery, and colonialism, through individual relation? The articulation of collectively traumatic experiences leads to the conflation of collective and individual trauma. Readers, therefore, must explore testimonials on multiple levels. In her works, Brand explores traumatic experiences, such as revolution or slavery, at both the personal and collective level. At times, these representations are directed at the development of a particular narrative or character; at others, these representations are all-encompassing and overarching events, events that affect an entire population or group. Representation becomes complicated in these expressions of self, and on some level there is a “compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others” (Gilmore, 5). Brand’s works, which often express individual and collective traumatic experiences, are not limited to the genre of autobiography. Nonetheless, her works express suffering in a confessional manner, and they “[make] it hard to clarify without falsifying what is strictly and unambiguously ‘my’ experience when ‘our’ experience is also at stake” (Gilmore 5). Her participation in the revolution in Grenada is one traumatic experience that Brand relates through autobiographical and fictional means. Present in her poetry, novels, short stories, and essays, the revolution is a collective traumatic experience related multiple times in various manners. Brand’s essay “Nothing of Egypt” explores the conflicted personal and collective sentiments caused by the experience of revolution. She details her own experiences during and after the revolution, but she is uncomfortable with its articulation.

Brand explains that “it has always seemed impossible to talk or write about [the revolution] because so many people lived it and many were injured more, more painfully because colonial war is physical and mental harm” (*Bread* 85). There is a hesitation on Brand’s part to express a trauma that is not solely her own, and yet most of her writing attempts to do so. She “hesitate[s] to write because writing is claiming all the pain and [she] cannot claim” it all (85). Furthermore, there is a sense of guilt, guilt for having survived and for being able to “carve out a place where pain is transcended” through the writing process (85). In a sense, her articulations of collective experiences function doubly to express the subject and a community, even if this community is not given an independent voice. Emile Benveniste’s discussion of language and subjectivity is relevant when analyzing the mutual articulation of collective and individual trauma in Brand’s work. He suggests that “in ‘we’ it is always ‘I’ which predominates since there cannot be ‘we’ except by starting with ‘I’” (202); without the ‘I’, the pronoun ‘we’ becomes ‘they’ or ‘you’. In any collective expression, then, the self comes first. Benveniste continues, noting that “the predominance of ‘I’” is so great that, “under certain conditions, this plural can take the place of the singular” (203). In expressing collective trauma, experiences rooted in the ‘we’, Brand is enabling the expression of her personal suffering. Personal pain exists within the broader experience of the revolution, and the expression of the collective and the individual creates agency for the speaker. The testimonies found within Brand’s prose, whether fictionalized or not, are forms of resistance through language, as articulation empowers the speaker because it gives the subject a voice. This vocalization also creates a space where the subject can transcend the imposed hierarchies of their actual location and become an authority.

In the same way that an articulation of trauma can be a form of resistance, so too can a challenge to the forces imposing subjugation. In language, colonial, racist, sexist, and classist ideologies are enforced through the words and grammatical structures of languages, as well as through the articulation of racial slurs, sexist remarks, and class-divided vernaculars. Resistance, then, must come in the form of language. It is not enough to speak of the subordination, for in doing so, the subject is using the very force behind its subjugation. While speaking out and articulating trauma are essential to resisting further subjection, victims “exercise the force of language even as [they] seek to counter its force” (*Excitable Speech* 1). This is inescapable, but opposition may be achieved in the process of renaming, through the application of new words and the ascription of new meanings. As demonstrated by colonial powers, “control over the language of naming is part of the process of asserting cultural dominance” (New 166). Renaming of the self and the environment, therefore, allows subjects to deny the pre-existing or imposed meanings of names and to exert agency in redefining their surroundings and creating places. In the essay “Brownman, Tiger...,” Dionne Brand explains that her generation “changed [their] names to Akua, Ayanna, Kwame, Kwetu, hoping that [they] could use the magic of those names, like garments made of stronger cloth to thread [their] way back through the portals of the slave castles, back to [their] true selves” (*Bread* 69). Renaming is a form of identification, a way of articulating the self, as well as a means to reclaim a past that has been erased by linguistic neglect or colonial influence. In renaming themselves with specifically African names, these subjects are proclaiming an identity that expresses historical, national, and political ties. The process of renaming refutes slavery and colonialism and embraces African ancestry.

The realities of a history of slavery and colonialism are not erased, but rather countered by the articulation of resistance.

In her novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, Brand explores the power of unnamings and renaming, showing both the process of naming and the refusal to do so as acts of resistance. It is through Elizete's story that Brand explores the opposing acts of naming and unnamings. The novel opens with Elizete's personal history, a life that begins by being abandoned under a samaan tree. She is unwillingly taken in by a nameless woman, only referred to as "the woman they give me to," and raised without ever knowing the names of the trees and animals around her (*In Another Place* 17). Her anonymous and unwilling caregiver is unnamed, we learn, because she is the descendent of a woman, Adela, who decided to take all names away. A slave taken from Africa, Adela refuses to name anything on the Caribbean island. It is out of pain and longing for her previous life that she "never name none of her children, nor the man she...sleep with and she never answer to the name that they give she" (18). Adela's refusal to name extends beyond people to the new place, an environment that cannot fulfill her longing for Africa. She "call this place Nowhere and with that none of the things she look at she take note of or remember or pass on" (19). In denying the presence of all that surrounds her, Adela engages in unnamings and attempts to block out her suffering. The result, however, is that she goes "blind with not seeing," and she passes this blindness on to her descendants (19).

Adela's strategy of denying a language that cannot account for her identity and experience is one of negation. She passes this ignorance on to future generations, but when Adela's great granddaughter unwillingly adopts Elizete, the child takes on the task

of re-naming all that surrounds her. Whereas Adela thought that refusing articulation was the best way to deal with her history, “all [Elizete] could think was how the names of things could make this place beautiful” (23). She sees the plants, people, and animals that make up her environment and names them. Elizete considers Adela’s strategy, and counters it with her own: “Where you see nowhere I must see everything. Where you leave all that emptiness I must fill it up” (24). Looking at what surrounds her, Elizete renames all that is around her: “pull and throw bush, make haste weed, jump up and kiss me flowers, waste of time plant, red berry poison, beach tree poison, draw blood leaf, stinging leaf bush, Jack Spaniard tree, wait in the road come night time bird” (20). The act of naming is a form of resistance because Elizete does not take on existing names but creates her own system of meaning instead. She makes up names equally for herself and for Adela. Elizete speaks these names for herself, hoping that she “would not feel lonely for something [she] don’t remember,” and “for Adela [so that] it might bring back she memory of herself and she true name” (24). Naming empowers Elizete, and this feeling of fulfillment stays with her into adulthood. When she finds herself in Toronto, she repeats the naming of all things new, noting the power that comes with the process: “Today she was Columbus, today the Canadian National was not the Canadian National yet and the Gladstone was not a bar and nothing had a name yet, nothing was discovered” (47). Empowered by her self-determination, Elizete sees the city as hers to be discovered and named, as a world waiting for her. The process of naming stands as an active refusal of given names and as an expression of the self. Moreover, the naming of the environment is the first step in the creation of a place. To turn a Canadian space into a place, Elizete must ascribe names and meanings to the environment. Just as she had to

create a place in the Caribbean, Elizete attempts to concretize Toronto and “brings herself into existence” by deliberate naming and discovery (Freiwald; “Cartographies” 51).

Lastly, the act of embracing national or regional dialects is a means to oppose ‘standardized’ English, a form of the language that contains a history of colonization and oppression. Language and identity are so closely linked that “[w]henver a people is oppressed, their tongue is likewise impugned” (Clarke 86). The Black subjects in the Caribbean speak from the position of the post-colonial subject. Post-colonial theorist Mae Gwendolyn Henderson looks to Bakhtin to explore the variance within a language: “according the Bakhtin, each social group speaks in its own ‘social dialect’- possesses its own unique language – expressing shared values, perspectives, ideologies and norms” (18). In writing or speaking in ‘non-standard’ forms of English, subjects are reflecting particular ‘social dialects’ to express distinct identities and to resist imposed language structures. Jason Wiens and Kaya Fraser, in their respective articles, emphasize the importance of clarifying the various forms of language used by Brand. Wiens notes that the terms “Standard English” and “nation language” sound static and homogenized, a function that attributes hierarchical values to the terms and denies the variations and instabilities of languages (88). He suggests that neither form is fixed and therefore cannot be understood in concrete terms (88). In reading Wiens, Kaya Fraser restates his point, insisting that critics who label Brand’s poetics as simply a subversion of set linguistic codes will further “the false assumption that there is in fact a preexisting ‘standard English’” and run the risk of “fetishiz[ing] the formal elements of this writing” (294). Fraser and Wiens enforce the idea that all forms of English are, in fact, ‘social dialects’ and that no actual version can be considered ‘standard’. While I believe that the

use of a hybrid language or demotic is a subversion of what is commonly referred to as 'Standard English', I do not seek to limit it to such. Rather, I aim to suggest that this particular use of language exists as one of many forms of English and that its articulation expresses a distinct subject position and place.

Without limiting their voices, subjects express themselves through varied pronunciations, expressions, vocabularies, sentence structures, and conjugations and expose the variations of the language. These expressions are a means of defining and owning the self and expressing socio-political realities of the place. The use of alternative grammars is a way to reinstate agency to those speakers who have been subjugated by social and political means or who have been told that their speech is not correct. The re-creation and reformation of the English language allows these speakers to demonstrate particular identifying factors, such as ethnicity, gender, and class, within the broad boundaries of the language. George Elliot Clarke looks to the English of Nova Scotian Blacks to discuss the varied forms of English in Canada. Using this example, Clarke notes that this particular form of English has been "denigrated as *dialect*, *lingo*, bad or broken English," and that these assessments of written and spoken language are exemplary of the treatment of Black people and culture in Canada, specifically in Nova Scotia (86, his emphasis).

Dionne Brand's body of work offers various voices and speeches that enable a resistance to linguistic norms. Through varied speech patterns, idiomatic expressions, and different sentence structures, Brand expands the scope of written language in Canadian literature. More importantly, this expansion redefines expectations of Canadian works. In creating these voices, she "signals the unsettled restlessness of the exile and

the refugee who must rechart, remap, and regroup so that both self and collectivity are made evident and present” within the Canadian landscape (Walcott 49). The refusal to limit herself (as an artist) and her characters (as subjects) to ‘Standard English’ therefore enables an expression of their shared qualities. These appropriations of language are “essential to her re-ordering of Canadian literary realities because she brings new sounds and tonality to what may be considered Canadian” (49). The diversification of speech patterns and vocabulary acknowledges and reflects the spectrum of people and experiences within Canada and is another attempt to place blackness within national borders. “The act of using alternative languages,” explains Myriam Chancy, “has become paramount in making ourselves visible within creative and critical writings” (29). The “use of Black English, *patois*, or *créole*” by Black writers is an effort to have these “languages visible in print in order to be discredited no longer” (Chancy 29, her emphasis).

While Dionne Brand uses dialects in most of her works, *In Another Place, Not Here* is particularly exemplary of her diversification of written English. Elizete speaks an English that is different from traditionally valued forms of the language, one that is informed by her nationality, experience, education, sex, and class. Written with subjective case pronouns and subject-verb disagreement, Elizete’s words are poetic and oral in nature. Brand opens the novel with Elizete’s distinct voice: “From the word she speak to me and the sweat running down she in that sun, one afternoon as I look up saying to myself, how many more days these poor feet of mine can take this field, these blades of cane like razor, this sun like coal pot” (*In Another Place* 3). In this speech, vivid and sensory similes express images without adhering to traditional pronoun,

subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure regulations. Elizete is not governed by restrictive language rules, and she expresses herself through her own form of English. Her words function doubly to express her identity and to resist being cornered by the rules of the language of the colonizer. In speaking as she does, Elizete refuses to fully submit to oppressive powers; instead, she makes this language and this place reflective of her experience and identity.

It is evident that language functions for Brand and Brand's characters as a site of resistance. The subjects in her texts modify and redefine the English language to express particular identities and use language to speak out about collective and individual pains. There is an effort to make Black writing its own form through an "assiduous investigation and utilization of regionalisms; the almost incantational repetition of noncolonialist names...; and the emphasis on exceptionally noncolonialist speech patterns" (Haberly 147). The post-colonial condition demands linguistic resistance, and the works of Dionne Brand vocalize resistance through the articulation of trauma, the renaming of the environment, and the redefinition of the English language. With resistance situated within both the Canadian and Caribbean identities, characters speak out against ideological constraints and situate blackness within the Canadian literary landscape.

IV. "vehicle of consciousness"

The essays of *Bread out of Stone* and the novel *In Another Place, Not Here* signal the interrelatedness of identity, language, place and space. The dynamic of space and place is apparent in these two works, as Brand's texts demonstrate the attachments to place and the possibility and mutability of space. Within these spaces and places, the

⁹ Brent Ostendorf. "Literary Acculturation: What makes Ethnic Literature 'Ethnic'" in *Callaloo* 25(Autumn 1985) 577-586. 581.

subjects imagine and seek out belonging, and they are met with varying results. Subjects are excluded from some communities and included in others, and they also deny existing power structures within language and find ways of resisting these limiting and oppressing systems. This linguistic resistance is more than just theoretical: the expression, renaming, and diversifying of “voice is metaphorical but also literal power, and what is at stake in the writing process is not only knowledge but also human livelihood” (Quashie 131). Resistance of limiting structures is impossible without the use of language, and both Dionne Brand and her characters find methods of subverting the hegemonic politics of language and diversifying the Canadian literary landscape. The exclusive, inclusive, and resisting dimensions of language are apparent in Brand’s representation of the Black subject’s relation to place, demonstrating one of Rinaldo Walcott’s central ideas: “To be black and at home in Canada is both to belong and not belong” (147). In this contradictory state, Black subjects use language to define themselves in concrete places and to articulate an investment in the possibility of other spaces. Although *In Another Place, Not Here* and *Bread Out of Stone* explore the longing for space, Brand suggests that belonging in Canada is possible. Signalling a new position, her latest novel, *What We All Long For*, presents Toronto as a place of belonging. In examining the breadth of her prose, the next chapter will identify a trajectory in her representation of spaces and places.

(Be)Longings: A New Chapter in *What We All Long For*

I opened my introduction by suggesting that the prose works of Dionne Brand present their subjects through two distinct and intersecting trajectories: the temporal and the spatial. Through her considerations of history and language, Brand explores subjectivity as it exists within the intersections of time and space. Rooting themselves in specific places, imagining themselves in various spaces, expressing themselves in assorted grammars, and defining themselves in distinct historical contexts, the subjects and characters of her prose articulate identities that are defined by these two trajectories. As discussed throughout the previous chapters, different genres enable distinct engagements with reoccurring themes and subject matter. Although her prose exists in a variety of forms, the works of Dionne Brand explore similar concepts. Present in her prose is a consideration of life for the Black subject in Canada, in the Caribbean, and in (relation to) Africa. Standing as personal accounts or fictionalized experiences, these texts explore the Black subject's experiences of immigration and physical displacement, ethnicity and racism, and gender and sexuality. Seeking to explore the relation of identity to space and place, Brand's writing roots these investigations in distinct spaces and places. In this last chapter, I would like to focus more specifically on Brand's last novel *What We All Long For* in order to foreground continuities with her earlier prose and to explore emergent new directions in her writing.

I. Continuities: (Un)Belonging

From her collection of short stories *Sans Souci and Other Stories* to her most recent novel *What We All Long For*, Brand's prose writing has explored the lives of Blacks in Canada. Regardless of whether her Black subjects are Canadian born, exiles,

or immigrants, her works expose the realities of Black life in this northern country and express attachments to the other places and spaces of the Caribbean and Africa. Through explorations of language and history, Brand sheds light on social realities and investigates the nation as a site of (un)belonging.

Dionne Brand's prose, which exhibits intersecting identities, presents characters and subjects who search for belonging. The longing to belong is inseparable from identity and identification since the experiences of racism, sexism, and classism – caused by negative interpretations of the identity markers of ethnicity, gender, and class – bring about a sense of not belonging, which undermines subjecthood. Belonging or a lack thereof is a function of identity relations, and this concern is central to Brand's works. "[B]e/longing – the *longing* to *belong* so that one may *be* –" expresses the complexity of subjectivity (Freiwald; "Becoming" 36, her emphasis). Relying on interpellation and self-identification, subjects seek out a state of belonging to define themselves. The experience of belonging is rooted in tangible places, through the subject's attachments to and interactions with the people and culture of a location. Subjects who feel marginalized imagine other spaces where belonging is possible. At once enabling and potentially devastating, the social categories through which identity is constructed, expressed, and read are investigated by Dionne Brand's prose.

As I have attempted to demonstrate through my investigations of history and language, the themes of identity, belonging, place, and space are essential components of Brand's prose. Specifically, the Black experience and identity are of interest, and Brand explores the spaces and places of Canada, the Caribbean and Africa, as they function to provide (un)belonging and express identifications of blackness. In *Sans Souci and Other*

Stories, the characters demonstrate the difficulties of belonging in a place that does not account for or reflect the self. Representations of Canada, in this collection, show a place that does not allow for full self-expression, while the Caribbean is a place where some subjects are limited and others feel they must enact cultural expectations or roles in order to belong. Africa, although not actually present in the stories, exists psychically, as characters invoke this lost place from their current locations. Because it remains a space of the imagination, Africa also denies the full expression of the self through the attempted retrieval of a lost history. The historical project *No Burden to Carry*, rather than using the concept of belonging as a theme, enacts the process of making a place for Black female subjects in Canada. While other works employ belonging thematically, this historical work actively pursues the creation of a community of belonging by bringing together similar subjects and placing their narratives alongside one another. The project stands as an attempt to insert a part of Black history into the Canadian national narrative. Seeking to place blackness within the national borders, this deliberate act further serves to create belonging in Canada for all Black subjects. The experiences of the Black subject in Canada are further highlighted in the collection of essays *Bread Out of Stone*. Using various identity markers as subject matter, these autobiographical considerations of ethnicity, racism, sexuality, gender, and nationality explore the reasons behind (un)belonging. Documenting Brand's personal experiences, these essays offer direct examples of exclusion and inclusion based on identity. I explored linguistic exclusion and inclusion in the novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, but language is just one example of (un)belonging in the text. The novel explores the safety and instability found in specific places. Significantly noted in the title, the novel also considers the longing for

other spaces, for places of belonging, by those subjects who are marginalized or who seek to escape their current locations. The movement between places signals the quest for belonging, and physical displacement also appears in Brand's next novel. *At the Full and Change of the Moon* presents a diasporic view of the Black existence. In this novel, which spans time and space, characters of the same ancestry find themselves in varied places. Their differing experiences and locations demonstrate the fluidity and possibility of the diaspora. While one would think that this marks them as different, the diaspora acts as a uniting device. The specific places they inhabit may not offer belonging to these Black subjects, but they have an abstract community, a unifying network, in the diaspora. Although the diaspora unites Blacks of the world through the shared experience of movement and displacement, diaspora subjects often feel longing for a more concrete belonging. Some of the characters of *At the Full and Change of the Moon* feel "lonely every day," experiencing the indefinable feeling of loss that comes with being removed from a community (*At The Full* 175). Searching to place Blacks in some context, *A Map to the Door of No Return* explores belonging and identity through the rupture in time and space caused by the slave trade. The text opens with the memory of a thirteen year old Brand pestering her grandfather for the name of their African ancestors. Her desperation to trace her identity is indicative of the need to root oneself in history, and the Door of No Return, this metaphorical site of forced new beginnings, exists simultaneously as "a site of belonging and unbelonging" (*A Map* 6). On the one hand, like the diaspora, the history of slavery unites all Blacks in their mutual lack of a past that extends beyond this fissure. On the other, in not knowing about the past, Black subjects are unable to fully know the self, and the places they inhabit are not entirely their own. As Dina Georgis

suggests, “the space of diaspora is not the space of home but the space of loss of home” (14). In this sense, belonging occurs through the absence of a concrete site of belonging. In Brand’s varied works, most characters and subjects exist in uncertain terms, searching to root themselves in their presents or come to terms with their pasts. The places they inhabit do not always offer belonging, and many of the characters and subjects in Brand’s prose seek or contemplate other spaces where belonging might be possible.

Thematically, Brand’s writing has circled around a set of concerns relating to identity and belonging in relation to place and space. While Brand offers new situations and expressions, these themes do not express a movement or a progression toward a projected telos. However, her latest novel *What We All Long For* presents a break in the presentation of the considerations of identity, space and place. Rather than expressing the quest for belonging, this novel offers spaces and place of acceptance. The change in perspective is significant, and the remainder of this chapter will consider Brand’s latest work as it differs from previous prose works.

II. Discontinuities: Where We Are Now

Despite maintaining continuity in theme and social critique, Brand’s most recent novel suggests a perceivable change in perspective. In what follows, I will identify these emergent new directions with respect to character, generational dynamics, and the potentialities of multiculturalism. The focus of *What We All Long For* remains belonging, but the novel demonstrates a distinctly different outlook from Brand’s earlier works: it is focalized through characters who differ in ethnicity, sex, sexuality and class; presents subjects who have created for themselves a stable community of belonging; and expresses a more unified Canadian landscape.

II. i. Cast of Characters: “the multi-layered voices of a city”¹⁰

What We All Long For tells the story of four characters in their twenties dealing with their own families, relationships, and identity struggles. There is Tuyen, a Vietnamese, lesbian artist; Carla, an interracial bike courier; Jackie, a Black fashionista who runs a clothing store; and Oku, a Black poet and recent university drop-out. Friends since highschool, the foursome is united by their mutual life struggles, and the cast of characters representing both community and diversity. Interrupting their stories is the narrative of Quy, a Vietnamese man who may be Tuyen’s long-lost biological brother. The family lost a son years before as they fled Vietnam, and many efforts have been made to find him. The novel does not make it clear whether Quy is actually Tuyen’s brother or is merely looking to take advantage of a family searching for their long-lost child. As a man of low moral standing, Quy could be using the family’s loss for his own gain. With their numerous attempts to find their son, Tuyen’s parents have been sending money overseas. Seeing opportunity, it would be easy for a thief to use the family’s search as a means to immigrate and find financial security. The question regarding Quy’s identity remains open even though we do get to hear his account of what happened on night he was lost and details of his life as an orphan. The narrative structure of the novel is essential to the development of the characters, both individually and in relation to one another. The novel opens and closes with third-person omniscient narration. In the opening, this narrator sets the scene by describing the place (Toronto) and the characters. At the end of the novel, the narration similarly returns to the third-person omniscient narration to describe the brutality of the assault against Quy. Throughout the text, the

¹⁰Quote from dust jacket of *What We All Long For* by Dionne Brand. (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2005).

chapters are separated by characters. Within each chapter, the narrative moves from first person to third person omniscient, shifting from personal reflections to description of action and setting. Significantly, only Quy's chapters use entirely first-person narration to retell his story. While the stories of Tuyen, Oku, Carla, and Jackie exist in relation to one another, Quy speaks from a different vantage point. His physical location, personal experiences, and lifestyle and the episodic nature of his narrative contribute to his separation from the other protagonists. In inserting his narrative amid the narratives of the Toronto protagonists, the novel juxtaposes his life with the lives of the foursome and illuminates the luxuries of life in Canada and the fortune of knowing a caring family.

These five voices form a group that varies in sexual orientation, ethnicity, family relations, and experience. Not only do they differ from one another but their stories point towards the broader plural society they inhabit. These characters signify a shift in Brand's writing, as their stories reflect a wider variety of gendered, sexual, and ethnic identities. Brand experimented with multiple focalizations and diversified perspectives in her short story "Sketches in Transit...Going Home," and her 1999 novel *At The Full And Change of the Moon*. Both of these texts, however, are narrated from predominantly female perspectives. In "Sketches in Transit," there are five sketches, but one character takes precedence over all the others. Although Brand creates sketches of Iron, Jasmine, Shanti, and Tony, the voice that takes over the narrative belongs to Ayo. Despite the presence of other characters, Ayo is the real protagonist, as the story follows her beyond the flight to Trinidad, beyond the space that unites these characters in their shared articulations of Caribbean-Canadian identities. The males in this short story, Tony and Iron, are particularly underdeveloped, as they exist to expose the social conditions in

Trinidad. These loosely veiled enactments of cultural gender and ethnic representations present weak male characters. Similarly, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is deficient in its representations of male characters. This multi-generational tale documents the many descendants of a rebellious slave, Marie Ursule, and explores their lives and the diaspora that has taken them around the world. Although chapters are devoted to male characters, they are one-dimensional, lacking depth and agency. Acting as foils to the female characters, as mere obstacles for the stronger, more developed women to overcome, these male characters seem to exist only within the context of their female counterparts. Adrian, for example, is a drug addict whose personal narrative relies on his sister's participation. While all of these narratives are united by relationships, and it is evident that each character interacts with others, the male characters cannot stand alone.

In contrast, *What We All Long For*, Oku is a character who stands on his own, while also interacting with his female companions. His character is given depth as the reader follows his disenchantment with academia, his turbulent relationship with his parents, his struggles to express his masculinity without surrendering to a life of violence and crime, his poetic endeavours, his unrequited love for Jackie, his appreciation for the jazz greats and musical form, and his contemplations of blackness. His thoughts and emotions extend beyond stereotypical depictions of the Black male as sexual predator or Black male as addict, two male stereotypes Brand has previously employed. Similarly, Quy's distinct voice and particular positioning within the narrative enable the development of another strong male character. His segments of the novel interrupt the stories of Oku, Jackie, Carla, and Tuyen, and his distant physical location and drastically different lifestyle set him apart from the others. An authentic voice is demanded by this

structure: the reader must believe Quy's characterization or the episodic nature of his narrative would fall apart. The sections focalized by Quy present a believable male; his voice rings true, and Brand invests in his development for purposes greater than metaphor. The creation of Oku and Quy signals a new depth to Brand's depiction of males, a success she achieves through extensive character development and consistent dialogue.

Just as the creation of developed male characters is new to Brand, so is the ethnic diversification of her protagonists. In her previous works, Brand's protagonists have, for the most part, been Black, working class women. Often engaged in unrewarding, labour-intensive jobs, these protagonists struggle to overcome sexist and racist encounters in Canada and the Caribbean. *What We All Long For* offers characters who differ in ethnicity; although there remains a distinctly Black presence, through the construction of Oku and Jackie, Brand presents other realities through Carla, Tuyen, and Quy. Carla, the daughter of an Italian woman and a Black man, enables Brand to touch on the interracial existence. Those who do not know Carla consider her ethnicity, noting "she might be Italian, southern...except her mouth has a voluptuousness to it, and her eyes, the long eyelashes weigh them down" (3). This pinpointing of "geographic and racial coordinates" is a common scrutiny that interracial subjects undergo, and it parallels the attempt to place anything other than whiteness outside of Canada's borders (Hill 173). Canadian author and critic Lawrence Hill, in his auto/biographical meditation *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, explores the interracial experience through an investigation of history, his parents' relationship, his own relationship, and interviews with both Black and interracial subjects. One of his subjects, Sara, notes that interracial identity is "a

difficult space to occupy,” and that “being of mixed race adds another layer of difficulty” to the cultivation and expression of personal identity (33). Although Carla does not focus on this aspect of her identity, she continues to struggle from an in-between place. In fact, much of her life is located in a liminal space, and this in-betweenness is a reflection of her multiple identities. Aside from being both white and Black, Carla finds herself negotiating gay and straight sexualities. Moreover, she struggles to determine her relationship with her delinquent brother, seeing herself as both a sister and a mother to him. While the implications of Carla’s racial identification remain relatively unspoken and undetermined, Brand articulates her brother’s ethnicity through definite terms. Similarly interracial, Jamal’s ethnicity is expressed as decidedly Black. When Jamal is arrested for auto theft, Oku defends his situation, saying, “he’s just a young black man-child who’s fucked up just like the rest of us. He’s trying to find his way” (*What We* 48). The certainty with which Oku describes Jamal’s blackness signals the relation of gender and ethnicity: Jamal’s identity is expressed as unquestionably Black, but Carla’s racial identity remains uncertain. Offering no solutions or even a commentary, Brand signals the intersection of gender and racial identities. Ethnicity is inflected by gender, as sex effects the interpretation of one’s racial ties. Jamal, an interracial male, has a unitary identity, but Carla, an interracial female, has an ambiguous identity. Throughout the text, she finds herself in between identities, and at the root of her in-betweenness lies her undefined or unarticulated racial identity.

Tuyen and Quy, the two Vietnamese protagonists, are anomalies in Brand’s writing. In her body of work, Brand has never included an Asian character, and these protagonists suggest a drastic evolution in her text. While Carla demonstrates ethnic

difference in Brand's prose, she does so within the Black context. Tuyen and Quy, on the other hand, are of completely different origins, with a language and cultural history distinct from the other protagonists. Furthermore, their cultural histories differ from one another, as Quy was born in Vietnam and raised in Asia, and Tuyen is second-generation, Canadian-born Vietnamese. Quy is separate in that he is physically located outside of Canada, speaking from a geographically and culturally different vantage point. Tuyen, however, is Canadian, but her background separates her from the other characters, not only in the story but also in the context of Brand's multi-generic oeuvre. Writing these subjects, Brand explores a different culture, and she expands her abilities as a writer. She creates two Vietnamese characters, a brother and sister, but uses this opportunity to explore the diverging characteristics created by circumstance and place.

The Black, interracial, and Vietnamese characters bring a new tonality to Brand's writing, offering a site of belonging. Unlike representations in Brand's other works, these characters create an inclusive network that does not discriminate based on racial identities. Significantly that these alternative voices exist as ethnic minorities, suggesting that Brand continues to explore the position of marginalized ethnic groups. Whereas up until this point, Brand's texts have aimed at exploring the Black community, this latest offering presents an ethnic minority community of belonging. In exploring this characterization, Brand is opening up her writing to broader themes, experiences, and audiences.

Unlike Brand's usual depictions of struggling, hardworking characters, Carla, Tuyen, Jackie, Oku, and Quy live lives of relative ease. Our first introduction to the protagonists sets them apart from others in the city: while the subway is packed with

people making their way to work, Oku, Tuyen, and Carla are only just returning home from a night out. They have “no annoying boss[es] to be endured all day,” and their freedom is interpreted by the commuters with varying degrees of jealousy: some wonder “Why isn’t my life like that?” while others scoff “That bunch of freeloaders! Never worked a day in their lives!” (*What We* 2-4). As the city bustles with industry, the protagonists offer alternative existences to the usual depictions in Brand’s prose. Oku and Tuyen, for example, survive on the charity of their parents: he lives at home while going to university, and she accepts money and food from assorted family members. Negotiating thankfulness and resentfulness, these two characters enact the common behaviour of youth who need to depend on their parents financially but deem themselves independent nonetheless. Jackie and Carla are employed, as a sales associate and a bike courier respectively, but neither of them considers their jobs with the seriousness or anxiety of other characters in Brand’s body of work. Jackie strolls into the store late while Carla takes a day off when she is not in the mood. More important to the description of their jobs, perhaps, is the fact that their employments are enjoyable. Jackie loves chatting with customers about fashion, and Carla uses her bike as a mental escape from her emotional and psychological difficulties. Riding around the city, Carla burns energy, reflects on life, and feels rejuvenated. These two modes of employment do not tire, dishearten, or demoralize the characters; rather, their jobs express their individual identities and enable them to exhibit their particular characters. While they may not be the most financially stable jobs, selling clothes and couriating make Jackie and Carla happy. Quy is the only character who makes a lot of money, but it does not happen without moral bankruptcy. When living in Bangkok, he is a thief and a bookie who

thrives by relying on illegal activities and underhanded business dealings. His participation in illegal activities extends back to childhood, when he was forced to steal to survive. Although Quy offers an alternative to the others, his method of income aligns him with the foursome; because he does not work long hours in a labour intensive job, Quy's character is similar to the Toronto protagonists. Dramatically different from the characters of Brand's other works, these five protagonists are not burdened by financial constraints. Like everyone, they are marked by class – seen by others as freeloaders or poor – but they are not affected by the way they are perceived by others. They do not attempt to raise their position or status within society, as other characters in Brand's body of work do, and there is no class-based struggle in their stories. Rather, they seem to challenge standard work ideologies, refusing to participate in the class hierarchies of a capitalist society. Aside from Quy, who actively seeks financial gain, money is not a primary concern for the protagonists. In fact, the characters associate wealth with unfair power dynamics. Tuyen says to her father, a successful restaurant owner, that having money only means “that you sacrifice everyone around you” (*What We* 58). Living by this principle, Tuyen avoids work, steals her sisters' clothes, and uses only found objects to make her art. In other works, Brand has presented characters, such as Jasmine in “Sketches in Transit...Going Home,” who have low-paying, labour-intensive jobs. In *In Another Place, Not Here*, Brand depicts characters who struggle for social change. While these characters have demonstrated the drive to ameliorate one's station in life through effort and hard work, *What We All Long For* shows that financial gain and class status are not central to happiness. Moreover, the novel depicts characters who are not politically engaged with the purpose of bettering their environment through the dismantling of class

structures. Rather, the protagonists actively participate in social disengagement, neglecting the politics of class structures by deciding not to participate in the dominant capitalist system. But what are the repercussions of this withdrawal, and what is Brand saying about this disenchantment? On the one hand, this disengagement enables freedom for her characters, allowing them to satisfy their own ideologies. However, this self-directed and self-serving ideology also hints at danger. Characters such as Tuyen and Oku exhibit a lack of responsibility, and they force the reader to wonder how their lifestyles would be maintained if not for the charity of their families. When Tuyen and Oku are viewed as freeloaders, the faults of this social and political disengagement are highlighted. In particular, a trait central to capitalism – greed – stands out. More frightening, however, is Jamal's behaviour. In his disavowal of law and order, he presents the danger of denying hegemonic structures. In disengaging from the dominant, Jamal has the freedom to steal cars and assault strangers, and the repercussions associated with these actions – jail time, criminal record, bad reputation, personal safety – are not enough to dissuade him. Instead, enduring these repercussions stands as a bragging right, as a badge of honour. Throughout, *What We All Long For* presents a tension between the freedom of denying dominant ideologies and the dangers of doing so.

Lastly, the protagonists in *What We All Long For* express diversity in their sexual orientations. This last factor is less groundbreaking than the others, as Brand has written both straight and gay characters in previous works. Nonetheless, sex and sexuality bear mentioning because this novel attempts to present a range of sexualities alongside the complexities of sexual relationships. While other texts express specifically lesbian or heterosexual relationships, *What We All Long For* engages with the various sexualities

and sexual relations of the protagonists, considering lesbian, straight, bisexual, and even asexual identities. Straying from the strictly lesbian storyline of *In Another Place, Not Here*, or the heterosexual, hierarchical desires found in short stories such as “Sans Souci,” Brand explores the range of love and lust that exists in present day Toronto. There are two complex relationships in the novel: the one-sided relationship between Jackie and Oku, and the undetermined and one-sided relationship between Carla and Tuyen. In the former, Oku is in love with Jackie, a woman who already has a steady boyfriend. Regardless of his sincere and heartfelt love, Oku is seen by Jackie as a purely physical distraction from her significant other. The tension between them builds until they have sex, but their liaison means more to Oku than it does to Jackie. Brand’s characterization of this relationship is a welcome diversification of traditionally portrayed heterosexual relationships. Altering her usual depiction, Brand writes a male character who expresses sincere sentiments for a woman and a female character who refutes meek, passive, or saintly roles. Jackie is cruel: she cheats on her boyfriend and uses Oku for sex, all the while knowing that he is in love with her. Defying the conventions of man as sexually aggressive and female as passive or betrayed, the novel writes Jackie in a position of power and considers a heterosexual relationship with a non-standard power dynamic. Within this dynamic, Brand also writes Jackie as vulnerable. She dismisses Oku easily because he frightens her. Oku reminds her of the instability that resulted from the family’s move from Halifax to Toronto, the “mix of desire and revulsion,” the feeling “of warmth and insecurity, damage and seduction” (*What We* 91). Equating her feelings for him with physical displacement, Jackie hints at the possibility that exists within someone like Oku. Just as physical displacement has a destabilizing effect, love creates

vulnerability. Jackie suggests having feelings for Oku, but her refusal to allow for instability prevents them from being together. The depiction of this heterosexual relationship challenges Brand's usual gender hierarchies and rewrites male-female power dynamics.

Even more perplexing than that of Oku and Jackie, Tuyen and Carla's relationship is complicated by Carla's unidentifiable sexuality. While Tuyen is a self-identified lesbian, sure of both her sexuality and affections, Carla straddles heterosexuality and homosexuality and borders on asexuality. This unclear sexuality occurs as Carla denies sexual attraction to women, despite intimate moments with Tuyen, and claims to be heterosexual. She tries to make "it clear to Tuyen that she [is] straight," but her character enacts bisexuality, or at the very least bi-curiosity (50). At times, Carla even hints at asexuality. More than just denying a lesbian identity, Carla proclaims that she lacks a central component to any sexuality: "I have no desire...I just don't. For anyone" (52). Whereas Tuyen's longing is "to be seduced, utterly seduced. By [Carla]," the object of her affection maintains a purposefully singular longing: "[s]leep. A deep, dreamless sleep" (152). Carla holds no sexual passion, and her ultimate longing reflects an individual identity and a desire for solitude. She represents an identity never considered by Brand, and combined with the other sexual identities, class mentalities, ethnicities, and genders, the characters of this novel demonstrate a notable development in Dionne Brand's prose.

II. ii. Belonging: “born in the city from people born elsewhere”¹¹

Another way in which this novel is a departure for Brand relates to the presentation of protagonists who exist in a stable community of belonging. *What We All Long For* offers four characters who find themselves in a stable, caring environment. They may have discomforts, distractions, and disappointments, but Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie also have each other. Their network satisfies a desire that is present in Brand’s other works, and the sense of belonging brings a newfound sense of security to her writing. Whereas previous works relied on the destabilizing effect of having no place to call home nor people to call family, this latest novel explores life from within a safe place. Tested by time, sex, and family struggles, the relationships of these four characters endure. They interrelate on a level never before seen in Brand’s body of work, and they are genuinely secure in their social settings. A major construction of the text is that these four protagonists are second generation Torontonians. Carla was born here, as was Tuyen, years after her parents and older siblings immigrated to Toronto from Vietnam. Oku was born in the city after his parents immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean, and Jackie came to Toronto as a small child with few reminiscences of her previous life in Halifax. They belong in Toronto because they never had to arrive here as adults and forge paths through a city of sexism, racism, and classism. This is not to say that they haven’t experienced discrimination but simply to note and examine the difference of their conditions. Their parents were the ones to navigate the unknown city, to bear the brunt of discrimination, and to make a home in a strange place, being of the same generation as those who make up Brand’s extensive body of work and experiencing the same struggles

¹¹Dionne Brand. *What We All Long For*. (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2005). 20.

as protagonists in other texts. This novel differs because it moves beyond the first generation and explores “[w]hat happen[s] next” (10). We discover that what happens next is indeed a more stable, community-driven life. Nostalgia for previous lives is limited if not denied by the protagonists, and they focus on the present and future instead. Tuyen, for example, is fed up with her parents’ trauma. She sees them stagnate over the disappearance of their son, Quy, and refuses to help her brother find their lost sibling. She has witnessed her parents mourn for their lost child and would prefer it if they could move forward. Similarly, Jackie’s parents’ talk of “going home,” despite there being no home in Nova Scotia to return to. With the dispersal of friends and family across the country, their old life in Halifax is not as they remember yet it occupies a space in their minds. Jackie, with few memories of this other province, sees no point in longing for it. Oku, whose parents are Caribbean immigrants, finds that his father’s ramblings about home mean nothing to his real world experience, and he sees his parents as “people who somehow lived in the near past and were unable or unwilling to step into the present” of their Canadian reality (190). Carla is separate from her friends in that she can’t help but consider the past. She struggles to remember her mother, even as memories fade, and she contemplates the great social undertaking of her white, Italian mother having children with her Black, married father. Carla knows that her parents’ interracial and extramarital affair forced her mother, Angela, into a life of solitude and pain, a life so alienating that her mother committed suicide. Carla is safe in her circle of friends, but she also tries to compensate for her mother’s premature death by caring for her younger brother. Her relationship with Jamal, however tenuous, is one that roots her firmly in the presence of others. She is not alone or living in the past, even if she misses her mother desperately,

because the future, Jamal, depends on her. Being of the second generation unites these four friends, for they all “felt as if they inhabited two countries – their parents’ and their own,” and it is their shared experience that draws them together (20). They found each other while trying to escape their parents’ “stories of what might have been,” “the diatribes on what would never happen back home, down east, down the islands, over the South China Sea,” and the “sentence[s] that began in the past that had never been their past” (47). In escaping these spaces that exist in the minds of their parents, the four friends create a place in Toronto. Significantly, Quy is excluded from this place of belonging. Lost in the process of emigration, Quy never made it to Canada and was never given the luxury of growing up in Canada. His experience is wholly different, and his voice functions to counters the lives of these second generation Canadians. A reminder of how inherent to the concept of belonging is the concept of not belonging, Quy’s character represents a stark contrast to the safe place that the others have found.

Brand has discussed the second generation before, noting the differences between their behaviour patterns and social interactions compared to those of their parents. In her essay “Brownman, Tiger...,” Brand explores the differences between the first and second generation, observing that Canadian born children are “not immigrants so they’re not grateful for the marginal existence they’re afforded” (*Bread* 59). Members of the second generation do not struggle in the same ways that their parents do, and “[s]adness doesn’t paralyse them” as it does the first generation (59). Instead of being bound by nostalgia for the past or by traditions of the home country, the second generation exists among other cultures, traditions, and realities. “[L]iving in multiple realities and learning to negotiate contradictions is not unfamiliar territory to most second-generation

immigrants” (Georgis 19), and the foursome display adaptability as they navigate the city. There is a dependence on this second generation; for parents, their “children were their interpreters, their annotators and paraphrasts, across the confusion of their new life” in this new city and country (*What We* 67). The children do not have the context of the homeland, so there is no point of reference for their parents’ nostalgia or longing. They bring their hyphenated identities to the city and find common ground with other second-generation children. Sometimes, distinctiveness brings them together; for Tuyen, Jackie, Carla, and Oku, their network is created out of being different: “their friendship of opposition to the state of things, and their common oddness, held all of them together” as teenagers and solidified their relationships as adults (19). Despite not owning their ancestral pasts as their parents do, the second generation diversifies their present location, connects with people of other origins, and changes the landscape. Instead of looking back, as the first generation does, the members of the second-generation root themselves in the present and look to the future. While their parents define themselves by the past, the identities of the young characters “are instead built on creating spaces that allow them to inhabit the city and claim their differences in ways their parents could not” (Georgis 19).

II. iii. The multicultural city: “construct[ing] a sense of belonging, community, [and] awareness”¹²

The discussion of rootedness, of belonging in Canada, leads to the final difference of this text: a more united Canadian environment. Canada is not glorified in this text, as incidents of violence, racial profiling, and discrimination remain, but Brand does present

¹² Lawrence Hill. *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*. (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2001). 10-11.

a country, or at least a city in this country, that is more accepting than previous depictions. Her vibrant descriptions of the different areas of Toronto highlight the diversity of the city, and the expression of acceptance and tolerance in the novel suggests that this place can be endured. Moreover, the city is no longer described in terms of Black and white. Rather, Brand expresses the variety of people who inhabit Toronto, using a third person omniscient narrator to provide the setting:

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Columbian café owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers (5).

The diverse inhabitants of this city mark this place and cause the protagonists to define Toronto in terms of multiculturalism. The varied identities of the inhabitants of the city create distinct experiences and associations for the characters, and the downtown core is represented as a place for cross-cultural exchanges. Rather than losing meaning, as some places do with the dismantling of borders and the dissemination of information and cultures, the city gains significance from its multifaceted identity. The suburb of Richmond Hill, where Tuyen's parents own a house, is nothing like the city centre. This "sprawling suburb," where "rich immigrants live in giant houses," enacts E. C. Relph's concept of placelessness (54). The "artificial" and "highly contrived" suburb, "for all its

cars and spaciousness,...was nevertheless rootless and desolate” (55). In this prefabricated development, there is no place because meaning is lost in its cookie cutter landscape. Brand calls attention to the existence of placeless places, and she counters them with the depiction of the city that has meaning in its multiculturalism. In *What We All Long For*, the inhabitants of the city are allowed to express their various origins without losing their place in a community of belonging.

In Brand’s previous works, Canada was represented as wholly unattractive, exposing the worst traits of the country and its people. As a site for racism, sexism, and classism to thrive, as a location of loathing, and as a disjointed and alienating place, Canada has denied belonging to many. While these issues do exist in *What We All Long For*, the novel presents Canada as a place where belonging is possible. This newfound description of Canada comes through collectivity, and is exemplified in the depiction of one particular event. The 2002 World Cup sets the stage for Toronto’s new appearance, as the event functions to display the inter-cultural exchanges that take place here. People of all descents celebrate the wins of various teams, dance in the streets, and honk their car horns to celebrate together, regardless of origin or racial make up. Unified by something greater than individual mandates or personal hatreds, the inhabitants of Toronto enjoy themselves collectively. It is ironic, though, that this universal experience manifests itself through the diversity of the attachments to and expressions of national identities. Although “small neighbourhoods” become “sovereign bodies” during the World Cup, all inhabitants are participating in a collective activity (203). Even though people cheer for different teams, the city, as a whole, is experiencing World Cup together. Looking at the celebrations, Carla, Tuyen, and Oku see “[a] stream of identities [flow] past the bar’s

window: Sihks in FUBU, Portugese girls in DKNY, veiled Somali girls in Puma sneakers, Columbian teenagers in tattoos,” and they realize that “[t]hey were, in fact, borderless” (212-213). The population is diverse but also able to co-opt aspects of other cultures, people, and places. There is a unity that emerges from this freedom, and in the midst of the World Cup celebrations, borders are made redundant. Whereas in other texts Brand displays the city of Toronto as ghettoized and uninviting, *What We All Long For* opens the city up to mutual appreciation and a borderless existence. Its diversity is “the beauty of the city, [and] it’s polyphonic murmuring” is indicative of cross-cultural exchanges (149). No longer seen as segregating or isolating, the city has changed significantly with this work. Tuyen describes Toronto as freedom, noting “you can stand on a simple corner and get taken away in all directions” (154). There is opportunity here, not just for business or relationships but also for self-discovery. Tuyen sees that “[n]o matter who you are, no matter how certain you are of it, you can’t help but feel the thrill of being someone else,” of exploring the possibilities of identities (154). With acceptance comes freedom, and in this sense, Toronto exists simultaneously as a place of belonging and a space of potential.

Tuyen’s artwork is a grand example of this pastiche of inspirations and cultures that influences the inhabitants of Toronto. Her *lubaio* – a huge structure constructed out of a stolen railroad ties – is an artistic rendering of the Chinese signpost, a structure to which “people would pin messages against the government” (16). Seeking to reclaim this space where the public could vocalize their dissatisfaction, Tuyen’s project turns into an expression of desires and longings. On the railroad ties, she plans to attach the longings of the city, including her own personal feelings. Taking from another culture, Tuyen

embarks on a project that is both personal and universal: her *lubaio* allows her to express intimate details of her family life, details she doesn't even share with her best friends, and it also forces her to engage with complete strangers, asking people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds about their personal longings. The range of longings – “a whole year to read,” “[t]o feel safer,” “four wives,” “better knees” – is demonstrative of the diversity of the city, of each subject's personal longing, but it concurrently expresses that all subjects, regardless of identity, long for something (150-151). The anonymity of each wish makes each longing even more universal, as these articulations begin to stand in for all people. Tuyen sees her artwork as “the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that [summon] themselves up into a kind of language,” and her project exists as a conversation of desires (149). The *lubaio*, then, stands as a uniting factor within the text, representing a diverse community and expressing the universality of humanity. Much like Tuyen's *lubaio*, *What We All Long For* is an artistic endeavour that seeks to illuminate commonalities without negating individual identities. This novel presents a city that is united by its inhabitants' specific identities and cultures, a place that at least four characters can call home.

III. “carried away by the melting streets”¹³

Ultimately, *What We All Long For* offers a consideration of blackness within the national matrix, one that positions Black people within Canada's borders and in the context of other Canadian minority groups. Being Black is no longer presented as wholly alienating because blackness exists here in relation to various ethnic identities and minorities. Characters engage in dialogues that seek to investigate rather than confirm

¹³ Dionne. *What We All Long For*. (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2005). 2.

the state of life in Canada. Significantly more positive than other works, Brand's latest novel is more inclusive than previous offerings, depicting diverse characters, stable networks, and an inclusive place. This text is not utopic: characters still struggle, and there is violence, loss, and sadness. The final pages of the novel climax with the brutality and violence of life in this place. Moments before Quy is to be (re)united with Tuyen's entire family, he is attacked. The theft-motivated assault is committed by Jamal, as he attempts to steal the car in which Quy sits. The implications of this act are great: Quy experiences physical harm and trauma; Jamal commits another act of violence and theft; Tuyen's family will experience another family trauma; and Carla will suffer the anxiety that comes with trying to protect and guide her brother. Throughout the text, Brand does not lose her political edge, as unstable race relations, generational differences, violence, and questions of police profiling and brutality continue to challenge her characters. Amid these threats, however, there is hope: hope for potential romance, hope for the reestablishment of family ties, hope for the expression and understanding of identities. In my introduction, I used the example of *Winter Epigrams* to explore Brand's thematic use of climate. Whereas in that work Brand used the Canadian obsession with winter as a metaphor for the struggles of racism, sexism, and classism, *What We All Long For* invites an examination of another season: spring. The novel opens with the description of winter in Canada, the "inevitable" and "unforgiving" season that ravages the city and its people, but the consideration of winter is brief; faster than winter's snow melts away, Brand's focus shifts to spring, that pungent and much anticipated season that brings new hope and possibility to all (1). Confusing the scent of newly revealed garbage, previously "buried under snowbanks for months," with the scent "of eagerness and embarrassment and, most

of all, longing,” Brand creates a setting, a particular time and place, where new beginnings are possible (1). *What We All Long For* is the spring of her body of prose, as the novel signals newness. Just as “the clearing skies and the new breath of air from the lake” suggest possibility after a long winter, this novel presents a new season in Dionne Brand’s prose writing, offering places of belonging to her diverse characters (2). There is continuity with her previous works, as her poetic style and political themes are recovered in the melting snow, but there is difference, too, difference in the multiple focalization that gives voice to a diverse cast of characters, in the second generation perspective, and in the presentation of Toronto as a place of belonging and space of possibility. Demonstrating continuity and new directions, *What We All Long For* marks a new season in her career, showing that with spring, “the fate of everyone is open again” (2).

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